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WORDSWORTH

By the same Author

REASON AND ROMANTICISM
PHASES OF ENGLISH POETRY
ENGLISH PROSE STYLE

COLLECTED POEMS

WORDSWORTH

The Clark Lectures

1929-1930

BY

HERBERT READ

The frontispiece is a reproduction of a life mask made by Benjamin Robert Haydon, May 13th, 1815

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CONTENTS

	INTRODUCTION	9
I	FAIR SEED-TIME	39
II	A VAGRANT TENT	71
III	THE DEEPER MALADY	103
IV	THE FLASHING OF A SHIELD	137
V	THE MAIN REGION	169
VI	THE SELF ANNULLED	199
VII	THIS MINSTREL . . .	231

ILLUSTRATIONS

(*From the originals in the National Portrait Gallery.*)

DEATH MASK OF WORDSWORTH *frontispiece*

WORDSWORTH, AFTER A DRAWING BY W. HANCOCK *facing page* 201

PREFATORY NOTE

This book repeats, with very little modification, a series of lectures delivered in the early part of the year at Trinity College, Cambridge. I would like to record on this open page my deep sense of obligation to the Master and Fellows of that College for honouring me with the Clark Lectureship, and my gratitude for their friendly hospitality during its course.

Herbert Read

September, 1930.

INTRODUCTION

Strange congregation! yet not slow to meet
Eyes that perceive through minds that can inspire.
Prelude VIII, 588-9.

INTRODUCTION

In the lives of some poets, however simple or various, the works grow naturally out of the recorded events, or are in themselves simple events: the facts explain the art, and biography is merely a synthesis. In the lives of others, the works of art stand out in severe relief: no events explain them; they have no background, no gradations towards experience, no transitions to events. Then biography becomes an analysis: we must seek in the works of art an explanation of the living force that animated them.

I think that Wordsworth's biography belongs to this latter type. That is to say, we have to analyse his work to explain his life. Only by so doing can we discover a credible human being; and only when we have established some casual relationship between the character of the poet and his poetry, have we begun to understand that poetry. And by 'understand' I mean 'enjoy,' in the only full sense of the term. Art does not yield its highest felicity to those who treat it like a sweetmeat, to be taken when the mind is too satiated for grosser nutriment. That is the miser-

ably insufficient conception of art as the subject-matter of 'taste.' The poet may surely be forgiven if he regards his art as something more individual, and, indeed, as something more serious. We may think of the poet as someone preparing a feast for our enjoyment, or uttering noble sentiments for our instruction. The poet himself has another point of view: he is a man endowed with a particularly complex emotional sensibility, and his immediate concern is to adjust his personality to his experience. His poetry is the bye-product.

It follows, I think, that we can learn as much from the *process* of poetry as from the finished product. That is why I cannot follow Wordsworth's own wish, that no one should pry into the lives of authors. 'Only to philosophy enlightened by the affections,' he said in a letter 'To a friend of Burns,' 'does it belong justly to estimate the claims of the deceased on the one hand, and of the present age and future generations, on the other; and to strike a balance between them.' This general obligation, he continued, 'is especially binding upon those who undertake the biography of *authors*. . . . Our business is with their books – to understand and to enjoy them. And, of poets more especially, it is true – that if their works be good, they contain within themselves all that is necessary to their being comprehended and relished.' I shall have

something to say presently on the conditions necessary to the understanding of poetry, but now I wish merely to observe, with reference to this general obligation imposed by Wordsworth on all biographers, that philosophy cannot extend to the lives of poets this affectionate amnesty, precisely because poets are men who exhibit in their lives and their works the laws of sensibility by which the less articulate part of humanity must be guided.

I have two general intentions. The first is strictly biographical, and concerns the development of Wordsworth's personality. That has too often and too exclusively been treated as an intellectual development. I wish to treat it as equally an emotional development. Wordsworth himself set a certain fashion by writing the *Prelude*, which was conceived as an account of the growth of a poet's *mind*. This was quite specifically the intention of the author of that remarkable poem. But what *is* the mind of the poet? Is it conceived as independent of the body? That was evidently Wordsworth's idea. By apostrophizing the mind, he hoped to conceal the significance of the body. The *Prelude* is a great poem; upon its greatness we base the claim of Wordsworth to be considered as one of our major poets; but its greatness does not consist in its biographical veracity. It is not a true poem

in that sense. Rather it is a deliberate mask. It is an idealisation of the poet's life, not the reality. To show what that reality was – that is my first purpose.

My second purpose is critical, and is only concerned with Wordsworth as a type illustrating certain processes of the poetic mind. I believe that Wordsworth in his life and literary activities reveals more clearly than any other poet in our literature the delicate relations that exist between poetry and the poet's experience. We know a great deal about the conditions under which most of his poems were written: the conditions under which his *bad* poems were written no less than those under which his *good* poems were written. The division between his good poetry and his bad poetry is clear and unmistakable. The good poetry is almost entirely confined to a definite period. What correlations can we make between the physical, psychological and economic factors in Wordsworth's life, and the nature of his verse? That is roughly the object of my second enquiry, but I would not like it to be assumed that I begin with any *a priori* theory of casual relations between the material factors of a poet's life and the nature of his poetry. The highest quality of poetry escapes analysis. It is an intangible essence embodied in the word, a synthetic

occasion that cannot be repeated or recalled, because the act of synthesis is its unique justification.

So much by way of explaining my general approach. In case I may be accused of excessive dogmatism, I would ask: what is a dogma but a plain statement of an axiom, and what is a dogmatist if not a man who takes the fewest words to express his axioms clearly and then to apply them generally. I would even suggest, that what is wrong with criticism to-day is not too much dogma, but too little; instead of dogma we have a description of the critic's private sensibility. It is not the function of criticism to be a polite sublunary mode of writing – a literature about literature, adventures among masterpieces, and so forth. Criticism is a tonic, and no matter if it be harsh and temporal; its permanency is not in itself, but in the effect it produces.

I will begin to dogmatise with this statement: There are two Wordsworths. There were two Wordsworths even during his life – a real Wordsworth and a legendary Wordsworth. It is the legendary Wordsworth that has persisted in the imagination of the public. In the obvious sense there was the Wordsworth of the poems published in 1807; there was the Wordsworth who lived for another forty-three years, forty-three long years devoid of poetic vitality, but filled with another activity which is that of the mind seeking

compensations for its defunct emotions. Actually that is only a superficial distinction: it is a vertical division in time, instead of an horizontal rift in character. It is not even true to say that Wordsworth wrote no poetry of vitality after 1807; as late as 1844, at the age of seventy-four, he wrote these lines on the mountain-daisy:

So fair, so sweet, withal so sensitive,
Would that the little Flowers were born to live
Conscious of half the pleasure which they give;

That to this mountain-daisy's self were known
The beauty of its star-shaped shadow, thrown
On the smooth surface of this naked stone!

And what if hence a bold desire should mount
High as the Sun, that he could take account
Of all that issues from his glorious fount!

So might he ken how by his sovereign aid
These delicate companionships are made;
And how he rules the pomp of light and shade;

And were the sister-power that shines by night
So privileged, what a countenance of delight
Would through the clouds break forth on
human sight!

The poem is spoilt by the two moralising verses that follow, but I think its beauty is not too sentimental, and is sufficient to prove that fires which blazed at the fullness of Wordsworth's inspiration did not suffer a sudden quenching, but rather were subject to an intermittency of appearance, the causes of which it will be our business to investigate.

By way of baldly announcing my theme, I might say that these two Wordsworths were Man and Mask – not Youth and Age, not Energy and Decay, but rather Reality and Myth. In my attempt to unmask the man, I may risk offending some sensibilities: 'we murder to dissect'; but my own admiration for the authentic poetry of Wordsworth is so great that I accept all the conditions of its creation. What if we do discover that the greatness of his poetry is grounded in animal passions? What if we do discover that the basis of all art is a certain measure of sensuality? If we accept the art, we must affirm the sensuality.

The physical appearance of Wordsworth is painted vividly by his friends and associates, by those who knew him intimately or closely observed him – by De Quincey and Hazlitt, by Lamb and Coleridge, by Crabb Robinson and Trelawny, above all by his sister Dorothy. What

kind of a man was the real Wordsworth? Of his character in general, of its subtleties and complexities, I shall speak at length in the course of this book. But before we begin in that lengthier strain, I should like to try and reconstruct, on the evidence of contemporary observers, the outward aspect of this man at the prime of his powers.

By far the best and most detailed portrait of Wordsworth is that made by Thomas De Quincey, written in 1834, but based on his vivid recollections of his first visit as an eager youth to Wordsworth in 1807. The whole account is dramatic in the extreme, one of the most masterly descriptions in the English language. I shall only abstract now the sentences relating to the physical presence of Wordsworth. He was then thirty-seven and had a fine sombre complexion, 'resembling that of a Venetian senator or a Spanish monk.' 'He was, upon the whole, not a well-made man. His legs were pointedly condemned by all female-connoisseurs in legs; not that they were bad in any way which *would* force itself upon your notice – there was no absolute deformity about them. . . . But the worst part of Wordworth's person was the bust; there was a narrowness and a droop about the shoulders which became striking, and had an effect of meanness, when bought into close juxtaposition with a figure of a more statuesque

build . . . the total effect of [his] person was always worst in a state of motion. Meantime, his face – that was one which would have made amends for greater defects of figure. Many such, and finer, I have seen among the portraits of Titian, and, in a later period, amongst those of Vandyke . . . but none which has more impressed me in my own time. . . . It was a face of the long order; often falsely classed as oval. . . . The head was well filled out. . . . The forehead was not remarkably lofty . . . but it *is*, perhaps, remarkable for its breadth and expansive development. Neither are the eyes of Wordsworth "large" . . . on the contrary, they are (I think) rather small; but *that* does not interfere with their effect, which at all times is fine, and suitable to his intellectual character . . . his eyes are not, under any circumstances, bright, lustrous, or piercing; but after a long day's toil in walking, I have seen them assume an appearance the most solemn and spiritual that it is possible for the human eye to wear. The light which resides in them is at no time a superficial light; but, under favourable accidents, it is a light which seems to come from unfathomed depths: in fact, it is more truly entitled to be held "the light that never was on land or sea," a light radiating from some far spiritual world, than any of the most idealizing that ever yet a painter's hand created. The nose,

a little arched, is large; which by the way . . . has always been accounted an unequivocal expression of animal appetites organically strong. And that expressed the simple truth: Wordsworth's intellectual passions were fervent and strong; but they rested upon a basis of preternatural animal sensibility diffused through *all* the animal passions (or appetites). . . . The mouth, and the whole circumjacencies of the mouth, composed the strongest feature in Wordsworth's face; there was nothing specially to be noticed that I know of in the mere outline of the lips; but the swell and protrusion of the parts above and around the mouth are both noticeable in themselves, and also because they remind me of a very interesting fact which I discovered about three years after this my first visit to Wordsworth.'*

This interesting fact was the extraordinary similarity between the features of Wordsworth and those of Milton, as represented in a certain engraving; but such a curious comparison need not detain us now. I want to emphasize the extreme acuteness, not to say minuteness, of this portrait of Wordsworth. The eyes of the youthful De Quincey were sharpened by intense curiosity; but the recollections of the impression made on him on first seeing Wordsworth were written some twenty-seven years later. His early enthu-

* *Reminiscences of the Lake Poets.*

siasm was enlarged by familiar knowledge and tempered by bitter disappointment, even by disillusion; he was therefore a detached as well as a detailed reporter. His account strikes me as extremely scientific for the time – the work of a man who had a considerable knowledge of what then passed for psychology. It is an account, moreover, that is confirmed by other contemporaries.

De Quincey was for some time on almost affectionate terms with Wordsworth, and we may assume that sympathy as well as curiosity sharpened his observations. But for Hazlitt Wordsworth admittedly 'never had any love,' though for a short while there existed between them 'a good deal of intimacy.'* Hazlitt's account of Wordsworth's appearance has the advantage of being still earlier in date. It was first published, in *My First Acquaintance with Poets*, in the year 1817, but it relates to the year 1798, the year of the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, when a meeting took place in Coleridge's cottage at Alfoxden:

'The next day Wordsworth arrived from Bristol at Coleridge's cottage. I think I see him now. He answered in some degree to his friend's description of him, but was more gaunt and Don Quixote-like. He was quaintly dressed (according to the costume of that unconstrained period) in

* Letters, II, 437.

a brown fustian jacket and striped pantaloons. There was something of a roll, a lounge in his gait, not unlike his own "Peter Bell." There was a severe, worn pressure of thought about his temples, a fire in his eye (as if he saw something in objects more than outward appearance), an intense, high, narrow forehead [according to De Quincey, it was not remarkably lofty, but remarkable for its breadth, and the life-mask taken by Haydon and preserved in the National Portrait Gallery makes it evident that in this detail De Quincey was right, Hazlitt wrong], a Roman nose, cheeks furrowed by strong purpose, and a convulsive inclination to laughter about the mouth, a good deal at variance with the solemn, stately expression of the rest of his face. . . . He sat down and talked very naturally and freely, with a mixture of the clear gushing accents in his voice, a deep guttural intonation, and a strong tincture of the northern *burr* like the crust on wine.'

This portrait is not unfriendly; its fault is rather that it is too literary: it reads into Wordsworth's appearance qualities which Hazlitt had derived from his poems, particularly the 'fire in his eye.' But other witnesses agree that there was something remarkable about those eyes. Leigh Hunt wrote: 'Walter Scott said, that the eyes of Burns were the finest he ever saw. I cannot say the

same of Wordsworth's; that is, not in the sense of the beautiful, or even of the profound. But certainly I never beheld eyes that looked so inspired or supernatural. They were like fires half burning, half smouldering, with a sort of acrid fixture of regard and seated at the further end of two caverns. One might imagine Ezekiel or Isaiah to have had such eyes.'*

We can supplement these verbal portraits by means of the considerable number of actual portraits of Wordsworth made during his life. Including contemporary copies, Professor Knight was able to make up a list of forty such portraits,† but many of them are of no great interest. The most interesting are two drawings made by W. Shuter and R. Hancock in 1798, when Wordsworth was twenty-eight years old. They have been frequently reproduced. One is a profile portrait, the other almost full-face, so they supplement one another. It is not a beautiful face – not a face to inspire romantic devotion, like Shelley's or Byron's. One is struck immediately by the harsh prominence of the nose, and the loose brutality of the mouth, and in Hancock's portrait at least, the features express no higher emotion than sulky obstinacy and fierce self-determination. Other portraits which impress

* *The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt* (London, 1860).

† *Wordsworthiana.* A Selection from Papers read to the Wordsworth Society. (London, 1889), pp. 31–60.

me as throwing some light on Wordsworth are two by Benjamin Robert Haydon, one painted in 1815, the other in 1842.* Haydon was a bad painter, but he was a genius of a kind, as we know from his Journal. His portraits are often caricatures, but they are inspired by a sound psychological instinct. Haydon greatly admired Wordsworth, 'I do not know anyone I would be so inclined to worship as a purified being,' he wrote. And yet he did not worship blindly. 'He is a perfect being,' he said, 'and will hereafter be ranked as one who had a portion of the spirit of the mighty ones, especially Milton, but who did not possess the power of using that spirit otherwise than with reference to himself and so to excite a reflex action only . . . In phrenological development he is without constructiveness while imagination is as big as an egg.' In Haydon's portraits Wordsworth is dominated by a brooding, meditative brow,

> 'as one inclined,
> Before the sovran thought of his own mind,
> And very meek with inspirations proud . . .'

But below the forehead is the dominant nose,

* Still a third portrait of Wordsworth by the same artist is to be seen in the painting of Christ's Entry into Jerusalem, now in the Art Museum, Cincinnati. Both Wordsworth and Keats in 1820 sat for minor figures in this composition.

the mobile muscular lips. The fires are dead in this face – most evidently so in the quite characterless portrait by Pickersgill in St. John's College; but in Haydon's portrait we can discern something of the havoc they have wrought.

I have perhaps spent too long on the mere portraiture of Wordsworth, but I feel that to hold in our minds a clear image of the physical features of the man is a salutary preparation for the interpretation of his work and temperament. It is not that I want to prejudice the reader against his personality. I shall have enough to say later of his real charm, and of the nobility of his character. But let us begin from the groundwork, and in this instance it is rugged and elemental – the very antithesis of all that is 'precious' in the modern sense.

The extent to which the biographer or critic is concerned with the personality of the poet is really determined by the poet himself. We are concerned in the degree that the poet has troubled his work with his personality. The personality of Virgil or of Lucretius, of Chaucer or of Dryden, even that of Milton, need not concern us because their poetry is happily free from it. But the poetry of Wordsworth, as indeed that of Shakespeare, is heavily surcharged with this personal quality. In the case of Shakespeare we are baffled by our lack of knowledge, we are

reduced to ridiculous expedients, even to the expedient of stealing the personality of one of his contemporaries. But in Wordsworth's case we have facts in plenty. In spite of the consistent policy of bowdlerisation maintained by his official biographers, we know enough about the personal life of Wordsworth to be able to say when and where this life with its emotional tangles affects the course of his work. This means that there is no simple choice between the biographical and the critical approach to Wordsworth. Both are essential to our understanding of his poetry.

Actually, as Mr. Ivor Richards has so clearly shown in his book on *Practical Criticism*, poetry is rarely approached in perfect mental freedom. We are not able to accept it as a simple sensuous experience because we are not naïve enough; we tend to confine it, instead, within the narrow range of our own intellectual sympathies. In the case of Wordsworth, this has led to a complete distortion of judgment. With the possible exception of Browning, no English poet has suffered so much as the hero of a cult. This particular process of idolization is perhaps peculiar to the nineteenth century. It is an aspect of the religious confusion of the time. Poets were made prophets, and willy-nilly out of their verse a gospel was extracted. The progress of Materialism during the nineteenth century had a curious

effect upon intelligent people; by which I mean people in whom reason and feeling are harmoniously developed. In so far as their rational faculties assented to the tenets of scientific materialism, to the detriment of their belief in revealed religion – to that degree their emotional faculties sought a substitute for religion in poetry. Poetry became for such people, not an art to be enjoyed, but a faith to be sustained. Now the poetry of Wordsworth was peculiarly suited to the requirements of such people. Into it they could read, if they so liked, an emotional pantheism which satisfied their instincts without compromising their intelligence; from it they could derive a humanism which compensated them for the imagined defects of Christian dogma. At the turn of the century Tennyson and Browning were to come to their aid; but from the end of the Revolutionary period in 1815, until his death in 1850, Wordsworth was the mainstay of all those who, remote from the deism of the eighteenth century, had turned in revulsion from the extreme atheism of the French libertines to seek for some expression of their idealism that was not supernatural in origin. The tribute that John Stuart Mill made in his *Autobiography* is well known, but I must refer to it on this occasion because it illustrates so well the peculiar attraction which Wordsworth exercised for a typical

young rationalist of the time. In the autumn of 1828 Mill was in much the state of mind that a young man of his age (he was then twenty-two) might be in nowadays. He was overworked; he was depressed; he was in a mood of utter despair. In this mood he took up a collection of Wordsworth's poems 'with no expectation of mental relief from it.' But he was surprised. He found more than relief; he found restoration. 'What made Wordsworth's poems,' he says, 'a medicine for my state of mind, was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty. They seemed to be *the very culture of the feelings*, which I was in quest of. In them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings; which had no connection with struggle or imperfection, but would be made richer by every improvement in the physical or social condition of mankind. From them I seemed to learn what would be the perennial source of happiness, when all the greater evils of life shall have been removed. And I felt myself at once better and happier as I came under their influence. There have certainly been, even in our own age, greater poets than Wordsworth; but poetry of deeper and loftier feeling could not have done for me

at that time what his did. I needed to be made to feel that there was real permanent happiness in tranquil contemplation. Wordsworth taught me this, not only without turning away from, but with a greatly increased interest in the common feelings and common destiny of human beings. And the delight which these poems gave me proved that with culture of this sort there was nothing to dread from the most confirmed habit of analysis.'

This is, I think, a clear case of that longing for a substitute religion which I have described as typical of the nineteenth century. I do not say that a man of Mill's intelligence was deceiving himself. A rationalist must do something with his emotional equipment, and in quoting this passage from Mill's *Autobiography* I have emphasized a phrase, 'the very culture of the feelings,' which seems to me to express a real virtue of Wordsworth in an easily remembered text. I do not want to anticipate in my first chapter the conclusions which I hope to arrive at in my last. I merely take this phrase as my text. Poetry *is* the culture of the feelings; not the *cultivation* of the feelings – not their rank growth nor yet their forced bloom; but their education, their growth to fullness and perfection, to harmonious life and rhythm. This is, under the aspect of poetry, merely the process of all art, and it is

as an artist that Wordsworth must be freely praised. I do not believe, with Sir Leslie Stephen, that Wordsworth's poetry is precious because his philosophy is sound. I believe that his philosophy is fanciful, if not false. I believe that his ethics are insincere, and that most of his political ideas were dictated by prejudice. Matthew Arnold went as far as that. 'The Wordsworthians are apt to praise him for the wrong things,' he said, 'and to lay far too much stress upon what they call his philosophy. His poetry is the reality, his philosophy – so far, at least, as it may put on the form and habit of 'a scientific system of thought,' and the more that it puts them on – is the illusion. Perhaps we shall one day learn to make his proposition general, and to say: Poetry is the reality, philosophy the illusion. But in Wordsworth's case, at any rate, we cannot do him justice until we dismiss his formal philosophy.'

That is as far as Matthew Arnold went: he issued his fiat. But we have learned since Arnold's day that criticism is not so simple. Poetry is the reality, philosophy the illusion – that we affirm more strongly than ever. But a poet is all of one piece. His poetry and philosophy are strands that twist through the whole course of his life. Can we dissociate them in the manner suggested by Matthew Arnold, and

appreciate the poetry whilst rejecting the philosophy?

Mr. Eliot has recently discussed the same problem in relation to Dante,* and Mr. Richards has also dealt with the subject in the book I have already referred to. Mr. Eliot makes a distinction between philosophical *belief* and poetic *assent*, and is prepared to concede that it is not necessary to share the philosophical beliefs of a poet like Dante so long as we give poetic assent. Only we must believe in the conditions of the poem; we must accept the poet's gambit; we must be instructed in the terminology and meaning of his system of belief. If I understand Mr. Eliot properly, he regards the *Divine Comedy* as like an autonomous realm in which certain beliefs are current, and we cannot become citizens of that realm without adopting for the time being the customs of the country. It is a state of poetic make-believe, and the same distinction may exist in the poet himself. Mr. Eliot would like to make a distinction between what Dante believed as a poet and what he believed as a man: for the private belief of a poet like Dante becomes a different thing in becoming poetry. He even suggests that the poetry is dissociated from the personality, and in this respect contrasts Dante with Goethe. Mr. Eliot cannot enjoy Goethe's

* *Dante.* By T. S. Eliot. (London, 1929).

poetry because he cannot separate what Goethe believed as a man from what he believed as a poet. That is to say, the philosophical belief in a poem like *Faust* is merely a projection of personal psychology, whereas in the *Divine Comedy* the belief is itself a poetic factor, a system visualised in all its coherence and integrity. Now in this respect Wordsworth stands with Goethe: his philosophy is a projection of his personal psychology: it has no history beyond his own personality. It takes much of its terminology and some of its basic ideas from the English empirical school of philosophy, but only so much as the poet chooses. Wordsworth does not, as a great poet might have done, make a poetic world out of the fairly coherent system of Locke.

I think this means, that we are unable to dismiss the philosophy of Wordsworth in the manner suggested by Arnold, because in practice it is impossible to say where the philosophy ends and the poetry begins. You can, in the case of Dante, conceive the philosophy apart from the poetry: it is the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas. You can therefore realise the poetic use that the poet has made of the philosophy. But in Wordsworth's case there is no formal and distinct system to which his poetry relates. His poetry is his philosophy and neither can be distinguished from his private belief.

This puts an additional burden on the critic. He has to define the poet's belief and submit it to a critical examination. For in the absence of a formal system of belief, which the poet adopts for poetical purposes, the strong sense of personal beliefs will tincture the whole utterance of a poet, determining his very imagery and vocabulary. The poet in this respect is no different from any other responsible person, whose moral problems are either solved for him by his religion, leaving his mind free, or left within the mind to colour his whole existence. I do not want to imply that no poetry can exist along with self-made beliefs; after all, poetry is primarily an affair of emotion, and a state of belief might be defined as a fixed emotion. But any poet who has the presumption to make his personal beliefs the subject-matter of his poetry, is, to say the least of it, forgetting how temporal a thing the personality is, and how quickly the fashion changes. A creed survives by becoming impersonal, by being formulated in universal terms. But the direction of Wordsworth's philosophy was away from formulation, towards individuality, 'the individual mind that keeps her own inviolate retirement.'

Wordsworth lived long enough to see the waning of his personal influence as a guide, philosopher and friend. Towards the end of his

life, his vogue was on the decline. When in 1879 Matthew Arnold wrote his preface to his selection of Wordsworth's poems, he was definitely on the defensive. There seemed to be some danger that the poetry of Wordsworth would be involved in the decay of his philosophy. Wherefore Arnold's gallant attempt to save the poetry by throwing overboard the philosophy. He did this with such skill, and with such a wealth of special pleading, that to this day we might say that the Wordsworth who survives is Arnold's Wordsworth – a lyrical or pastoral poet, anything but the great philosophical poet of his own and Coleridge's conception.

Arnold's 'Preface' is an invaluable document. It is the first outline of an historical Wordsworth and the beginning of a settled level of appreciation. There is not much difference in the final status given to Wordsworth by Arnold fifty years ago, and the status which a circumspect critic, such as Professor Garrod, would give him to-day. And in this book frankly I do not want so much to question that status as to give it more exact foundations. The history of Wordsworth's reputation is not such as to suggest a natural eclipse. That eclipse would have occurred already, if there had been no permanent element of appeal in his poetry. As reputations go, Wordsworth's uncertain season is over. Even in Arnold's time

it was possible to see that. He opens his 'Preface' with a review of the ups and downs of Wordsworth's reputation which I would like to repeat here:

'I remember hearing Lord Macaulay say, after Wordsworth's death, when subscriptions were being collected to found a memorial to him, that ten years earlier more money could have been raised in Cambridge alone, to do honour to Wordsworth, than was now raised all through the country. Lord Macaulay had, as we know, his own heightened and telling way of putting things, and we must always make allowance for it. But probably it is true that Wordsworth has never, either before or since, been so accepted and popular, so established in possession of the minds of all who profess to care for poetry, as he was between the years 1830 and 1840, and at Cambridge . . . The influence of Coleridge upon young men of ability was then powerful, and was still gathering strength; this influence told entirely in favour of Wordsworth's poetry. Cambridge was a place where Coleridge's influence had great action, and where Wordsworth's poetry, therefore, flourished especially. But even amongst the general public its sale grew large, the eminence of its author was widely recognised, and Rydal Mount became an object of pilgrimage.'

The diminution in the fame of Wordsworth set in, according to Arnold, about 1842, when the influence of Tennyson first became decisive. The diminution has continued, said Arnold, until the present time. That was 1879. But Matthew Arnold turned the tide. Nothing, of course, could stem the tide of Tennyson, except death. But so able was Arnold's apology for Wordsworth, so illuminating his selection of the poems, that for the rest of the century the tides were to flow together. With the new century it is possible that both received a check, from which Tennyson did not recover. But there was a distinct revival of interest in Wordsworth's poetry during the war, and since the war the discoveries made about his early liaison with Annette Vallon have made it necessary for us to revise our estimate of his personality. My excuse, therefore, for taking up the subject of Wordsworth is now evident. There is a vitality in his poetry and personality which is not the vitality of the text-books. Wordsworth was born in 1770. He was a youth of nineteen when the French Revolution shook the world. He had an instinct for his time; his spirit and his mind sprang up to the challenge of momentous events; he was swept away and lost all bearings. Then he began to find himself again; to educate his feelings; to reconstruct his faith. In that process, his greatest poetry was written. I should

not run the risk of wearying the reader with a study of this man and his poetry did I not believe that we live in an age to which his history and example are peculiarly relevant.

CHAPTER I

FAIR SEED-TIME

Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear . . .
Prelude I, 301–2.

CHAPTER I

FAIR SEED-TIME

Wordsworth was born on April 17th, 1770, at Cockermouth in Cumberland. His father, John Wordsworth, was an attorney-at-law, and law-agent to Sir James Lowther, afterwards Earl of Lonsdale. His grandfather came to Westmoreland from Peniston in the West Riding of Yorkshire, where the family had been established probably before the Norman Conquest. His mother's name was Anne Cookson, the only daughter of a mercer of Penrith, who had married a member of the ancient Westmoreland family of Crackanthorp. Thus Wordsworth was of pure northern stock, and this fact has a certain significance. Wordsworth was of a recognisable racial type, one of the most distinct to be found in the British Isles. The physical characteristics of the race need not concern us here, though even in this respect Wordsworth, with his spare bony frame, was true to type. But even if we confine ourselves to psychological characteristics we must still trace the peculiarities of the type back to historical and even geographical causes. The

North-eastern corner of England, up to the time of the Norman Conquest, developed as an isolated unit. This region was bounded on the north by the wastes of Northumberland and on the south by the dykes and marshes that once stretched inland from the Humber and the Wash, and bounded again to the west by the Pennine Range. This geographical isolation to some extent determined racial development. Of the three great branches of the English race that came to Britain from Northern Germany – the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes – only the first settled in Yorkshire. They were not left in undisturbed possession of this region, but gradually, through a long process of invasion and settlement, became mingled with Norse strains. Yorkshire became, in effect, a Scandinavian province, and Yorkshiremen like to trace their marked determination and independence to the Viking blood which is undoubtedly one of the elements which go to the making of this race of men. When William of Normandy conquered England, he met with the fiercest opposition from these wild northmen, and only subdued them by making the whole region a waste land. The Norse strain has remained quite evident even up to modern times, and there is still a strong physical resemblance between the fishermen and peasants of Norway and those of northern Yorkshire.

The type is distinguished by its hardihood, its pertinacity, and its fundamental seriousness. Captain Cook and Martin Frobisher were of this race, as were John Wyclif and Roger Ascham. So, too, was that great mythical hero of self-reliance, Robinson Crusoe. Yorkshiremen are imaginative, like all northmen, but a matter-of-factness, a strong sense of objectivity, a faculty for vivid visualisation, keep them from being profoundly mystical. The same qualities make them wary in their actions, and canny in their reckonings. But their most extraordinary characteristic – a characteristic with which in the process of time they have leavened almost the entire English race – is their capacity for masking their emotions. It is not a question of suppression, nor of atrophy; the normal feelings of the human being are present in more than their normal force, but banked up against this impenetrable reserve. No doubt, as a protective device, this iron mask has had historical advantages. And in the domestic sphere it ensures a business-like despatch of those affairs, such as births, deaths and marriages, which tend to choke up the existence of a more expansive people.

In all this, Wordsworth was a true northerner. Indeed, it is almost impossible to understand his life and character unless we remember his racial capacity for masking the strength of his feelings.

Wordsworth, as his sister Dorothy once said, was a man violent in affection. But it was necessary to affirm that fact. Outwardly he was cold, even hard. Inwardly he was all fire. But true to his type, he was not going to give himself away. Not even in his poetry, not even in the most inspired moments of his creative activity. Passion, of course, does blaze from many a poem of Wordsworth's; but not the direct passion of profane love, not even the direct passion of sacred love, but passion transmuted into impersonal things – rocks, and stones, and trees.

Of the personalities of Wordsworth's parents we know very little – nothing of any value. His mother died when he was eight years old, his father when he was fourteen. That is late enough, in both cases, for a decisive influence to have been exercised on a child. Indeed, before his mother's death William had already developed peculiarities of character which caused her some anxiety. In the *Autobiographical Memoranda* dictated by Wordsworth at Rydal Mount in 1847,* he himself relates that an intimate friend of his mother's once told him that he was the only one of the five children about whose future life his mother was anxious; 'and he, she said, would be remarkable either for good or for evil.' 'The cause of this was,' continues Wordsworth, 'that

* Grosart, *Prose Works*, Vol. III, pp. 219–224.

I was of a stiff, moody, and violent temper; so much so that I remember once going into the attics of my grandfather's house at Penrith, upon some indignity having been put upon me, with an intention of destroying myself with one of the foils which I knew was kept there. I took the foil in my hand, but my heart failed.

Mrs. Wordsworth seems to have realised that repression was not the proper treatment for such a rebellious nature. In the Fifth Book of the *Prelude* there is a passage in which Wordsworth pays a tribute to his mother's wisdom in this matter:

> Early died
> My honoured Mother, she who was the heart
> And hinge of all our learnings and our loves:
> She left us destitute, and, as we might,
> Trooping together. Little suits it me
> To break upon the Sabbath of her rest
> With any thought that looks at others' blame;
> Nor would I praise her but in perfect love.
> Hence am I checked: but let me boldly say,
> In gratitude, and for the sake of truth,
> Unheard by her, that she, not falsely taught,
> Fetching her goodness rather from times past,
> Than shaping novelties for times to come,
> Had no presumption, no such jealousy,
> Nor did by habit of her thoughts mistrust

Our nature, but had virtual faith that He
Who fills the mother's breast with innocent milk,
Doth also for our nobler part provide,
Under His great correction and control,
As innocent instincts, and as innocent food;
Or draws for minds that are left free to trust
In the simplicities of opening life
Sweet honey out of spurned or dreaded weeds.
This was her creed, and therefore she was pure
From anxious fear of error or mishap,
And evil, overweeningly so called;
Was not puffed up by false unnatural hopes,
Nor selfish with unnecessary cares,
Nor with impatience from the season asked
More than its timely produce; rather loved
The hours for what they are, than from regard
Glanced on their promises in restless pride.
Such was she – not from faculties more strong
Than others have, but from the times, perhaps,
And spot in which she lived, and through a grace
Of modest meekness, simple-mindedness,
A heart that found benignity and hope
Being itself benign.

v, 256–293 (1850).

'My drift I fear,' continues Wordsworth, 'is scarcely obvious,' and he proceeds, with a mock

seriousness that is a little heavy, to paint the dreadful picture of the model child, trained to be a paragon of virtue and wisdom:

> 'For this unnatural growth the trainer blame,
> Pity the tree.'

for ''tis a life of lies from the beginning, and in lies must end.' Immediately after this poetic discussion of the principles of early education, the *Prelude* soars into one of those passages of supreme poetic expression which, by their intuitive apprehension of reality, communicate at once the essential truth:

> There was a Boy: ye knew him well, ye cliffs
> And islands of Winander! – many a time
> At evening, when the earliest stars began
> To move along the edges of the hills,
> Rising or setting, would he stand alone
> Beneath the trees or by the glimmering lake,
> And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands
> Pressed closely palm to palm, and to his mouth
> Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,
> Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls,
> That they might answer him; and they would shout
> Across the watery vale, and shout again,
> Responsive to his call, with quivering peals,
> And long halloos and screams, and echoes loud,

Redoubled and redoubled, concourse wild
Of jocund din; and, when a lengthened pause
Of silence came and baffled his best skill,
Then sometimes, in that silence while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind,
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, received
Into the bosom of the steady lake.

v, 364-388 (1850).

The two passages which I have already quoted raise a question which we must consider as a preliminary to our whole study of Wordsworth's development: I mean, to what extent can we trust the poet's own work, and the *Prelude* in particular, as a guide to the significant events of his life? In the passages quoted, the fully developed man of thirty-five is recollecting the child of seven or eight. To what extent are his recollections guided and influenced by his present ideals? Considerably, I should say, especially in view of the nature of those ideals, and the importance that is assigned in them to the period of childhood. If the state of childhood is ideal, what is more natural than that the child should be idealised? But in a wider sense altogether I tend to distrust

the evidence of the *Prelude*, thereby disagreeing with Professor Garrod, for instance, who rather naïvely assumes that 'not only are poets commonly a more truthful race than other men, but that they frequently understand themselves better than other people understand them.'* In one sense, yes. The poet has a sense of reality which surpasses that of other men; he can recognize the significant among his emotions. But the very process of poetry involves the idealization, or more exactly the universalization, of individual experience. An emotion in the poet, or the recollection of that emotion in tranquillity, is the signal for a departure into the realm of the imagination. It is an escape into a wider reality. The personal has become the universal, and once in that freer space, it is almost impossible to find the way back again to the limitations of person, place and time.

That is one aspect of the difficulty of accepting the *Prelude* as simple evidence for the events of Wordsworth's life. Another aspect is the simple psychological truth that self-visualization is nearly always self-aggrandisement. It is very difficult to tell the truth about one's self, not merely in the obvious sense that we are all apt to think well of ourselves, but in the less obvious sense that even when we are trying to scandalize the world with a

* *Wordsworth*, p. 72.

picture of our utter heartlessness or immorality, we are all the while obeying an obscure impulse to ensure an inverse glory. It is often said that all fiction is disguised autobiography: it is just as true to say that all autobiography is disguised fiction. The *Prelude* is no exception; it is the story of 'the growth of a poet's mind,' and the poet is conceived, not merely as William Wordsworth, but as an ideal character progressing towards a state of blessedness in which he shall be fit to write that great philosophical poem conceived by Coleridge in the early years of their poetic faith. It is not Wordsworth's sincerity that is in question; a great poem like the *Prelude* could never have been written without the deepest sense of sincerity. But sincerity is not truth; it is only conviction – a state of belief directed towards some arbitrary end.

With these reservations constantly in mind, we may follow the *Prelude* as a guide to the significant events in Wordsworth's early life. On the death of his mother, the family was dispersed. There were five children: Richard, born in 1768; William, born in 1770; Dorothy, born in 1771; John, born in 1772, and Christopher, born in 1774. Of the eldest brother we hear very little; his disposition was entirely different from the poet's, and we gather that no love was lost between them. But it was with this brother that,

in 1778, the year of their mother's death, he was sent to the Grammar School at Hawkshead, a village at the head of Esthwaite Water, which is a small lake to the west of Windermere. There he stayed for nine years, and there he was joined, in due course, by his brothers John and Christopher. Presumably, until their father's death in 1783, the family was reunited for the holidays at Cockermouth, though Dorothy was isolated with her mother's parents at Penrith.

Wordsworth's own account of his schooldays, in the *Autobiographical Memoranda*, from which I have already quoted, is brief but adequate. He says: 'Of my earliest days at school I have little to say, but that they were very happy ones, chiefly because I was left at liberty, then and in the vacations, to read whatever books I liked. For example, I read all Fielding's works, *Don Quixote*, *Gil Blas*, and any part of Swift that I liked; *Gulliver's Travels*, and the *Tale of the Tub*, being both much to my taste. I was very much indebted to one of the ushers of Hawkshead School, by name Shaw, who taught me more of Latin in a fortnight than I had learnt during two preceding years at the school of Cockermouth.'

The school-hours were fairly long – in winter seven in the morning till eleven, and from one to four in the afternoon; in summer they began an

hour earlier and ended an hour later. But outside these hours, the boys were apparently at perfect liberty. They lodged with the cottagers of Hawkshead, free from the jealous restrictions that too often make home a prison. The country round them was a boy's paradise – rivers and lakes, woods and fields, and wide spaces of the hills. Here they roamed at will – bird's-nesting, snaring, rowing and skating on the lakes, climbing crags, exploring the wild and remote corners of that exciting land. If Wordsworth had been an ordinary boy, he would have gained little more than rude health and an independent spirit. But we know that before he went to Hawkshead he was already moody by nature. 'Moody' – the word implies abnormal sensibility. We shall never know what particular hereditary disposition, or what psychological developments in infancy, endowed Wordsworth with this moody temperament. We are lucky in knowing, on his own authority, that it was already a factor in his life at the age of eight.

The First and Second Books of the *Prelude* make very definite claims for the formative influences of nature on the unfolding mind of the child. Even as a babe in arms these forces were at work, for did not the River Derwent that flowed past his home at Cockermouth

Make ceaseless music that composed my
thoughts
To more than infant softness, giving me
Amid the fretful dwellings of mankind
A foretaste, a dim earnest, of the calm
That Nature breathes among the hills and
groves?

I, 277-81 (1850).

And then he exclaims:

Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear:
Much favoured in my birthplace, and no less
In that belovéd Vale to which ere long
We were transplanted——

I, 301-5 (1850).

I do not wish to enter into any arid and pseudo-scientific discussion of the influence of environment on character. My own observations persuade me to scepticism. I feel that as human beings we enter the world with definite potentialities; and though our course through life is determined by the obstacles we meet, it is only deflected in certain limited lateral directions. The main drift is never obscure. There is no turning-back, no possibility of reversal or revolution. Now an endowment of sensibility is one thing, the capacity to transform sensibility into

thought is another. Wordsworth seems to claim for his childhood, not only the passive influence of Nature, but also the active reciprocation of the child. There are two important passages in Book I of the *Prelude* which make this clear:

> Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows
> Like harmony in music; there is a dark
> Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles
> Discordant elements, makes them cling together
> In one society. How strange that all
> The terrors, pains, and early miseries,
> Regrets, vexations, lassitudes interfused
> Within my mind, should e'er have borne a part,
> And that a needful part, in making up
> The calm existence that is mine when I
> Am worthy of myself! Praise to the end!
> Thanks to the means which Nature deigned to employ;
> Whether her fearless visitings, or those
> That came with soft alarm, like hurtless light
> Opening the peaceful clouds; or she may use
> Severer interventions, ministry
> More palpable, and so she dealt with me.
>
> I, 340-356.

These last words, 'and so she dealt with me,' come from the 1805 version of the *Prelude*; in the 1850 version, for some reason Wordsworth shirked

the direct application of the passage to his own self, and substituted the tame words, 'as best might suit her aim.'

This passage is followed by one of the most famous and most vivid passages in the *Prelude* – the passage in which the poet relates how one summer evening he finds a boat by the lake side, and somewhat stealthily, somewhat troubled in conscience, glides across the moon-lit surface of the water. And how, as his elfin pinnace went heaving through the water like a swan, suddenly, from behind a craggy steep till then the horizon's bound

> . . . a huge peak, black and huge,
> As if with voluntary power instinct
> Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,
> And growing still in stature the grim shape
> Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
> For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
> And measured motion like a living thing,
> Strode after me.
>
> I, 378-385 (1850).

He turned, and stole back with trembling oars to the landing-place, where he left the boat and went home through the meadows 'in grave and serious mood.' But for many days after he had seen this spectacle, his brain, he says,

Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts
There hung a darkness, call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.
1, 392-400 (1850).

The incident, as Wordsworth relates it, has the awful reality of a nightmare, and we cannot doubt that the experience had been an actual one. In the first version of the *Prelude* we find more circumstantial details: the incident took place during the holidays when he was staying, 'a School-boy Traveller,' at the Inn at Patterdale, and the lake was Ullswater. It is all circumstantial; but that is not the point. Wordsworth goes on to suggest the existence of a special fellowship between himself and Nature. In the earliest extant draft of the *Prelude*, probably written in 1799–1800,* the relationship is frankly pantheistic. It is explained in these words:

* De Sélincourt, p. xxii.

Ah not in vain, ye Beings of the hills,
And ye that walk the woods and open heaths
By moon or starlight, thus from my first dawn
Of childhood, did ye love to intertwine
The passions that build up our human Soul,
Not with the mean and vulgar works of Man,
But with high objects, with eternal* things,
With life and nature, purifying thus
The elements of feeling and of thought,
And sanctifying, by such discipline,
Both pain and fear, until we recognize
A grandeur in the beatings of the heart.
I, 428-441 (1799-1805).

In later versions the *Beings of the Hills*, et cetera, were transfigured into the

Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe!
Thou Soul that art the eternity of thought,
Thou givest to forms and images a breath
And everlasting motion –

but that merely indicates the progress, in these five or six years, from a poetic paganism to a philosophic pantheism – a development elsewhere evident in the different versions of the *Prelude*. But whether many Beings or one Spirit, what are we to make of Wordsworth's claim that

* 1805, enduring.

these forces of nature exercised an active influence in the formation of his 'soul'? It is true that elsewhere in this Book, he speaks of holding

> *Unconscious* intercourse with beauty
> Old as creation, drinking in a pure
> Organic pleasure from the silver wreaths
> Of curling mist . . .

but he immediately contradicts this word 'unconscious' by saying that often amid his childish pursuits he felt

> Gleams like and flashing of a shield; – the earth
> And common face of Nature *spake* to me
> Rememberable things

He distinguished two forms of activity:

> How Nature by *extrinsic* passion first
> Peopled the mind with forms sublime or fair,
> And made me love them.

and, not to be confused with these forms given extrinsically, 'joys of subtler origin' –

> Those hallowed and pure motions of the sense
> Which seem, in their simplicity, to own
> An intellectual charm.

On the one hand, a sensuous pleasure derived from the externality of objects; on the other hand, that calmer delight which follows the subjective awareness of these sensations.

Wordsworth anticipated the charge I am going to make, and in the penultimate paragraph of Book I, expresses a fear that he may have been misled by the infirmity of love for days disowned by memory, to plant, ere the breath of spring, snowdrops among winter snows. That, at least, is my reading of the meaning of a disputed passage: he fears that he has implied a 'subtler origin' for certain joys at an age when a child is only passively receptive of impressions. If that is not what Wordworth means by his metaphor, it is nevertheless a charge which can, I think, on psychological grounds be brought against his whole treatment of the relationship between the 'visible scene' of infancy and the evolving consciousness of the child. I would rather suggest that the animal's awareness of the peculiarities of its habitat is not developed unless and until it is deprived of that habitat; that Wordsworth did not become conscious of the intimate link that existed between his character and his surroundings until that link was broken by his departure for Cambridge in 1787. Even then the full realisation of the significance of his early mode of life did not come to him; what

trace of that passionate intensity of feeling for nature do we find in *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*, his first published poems? Scarcely any, as we shall see when we consider those early works of his. The realisation did not come, in my opinion, until some time after his second visit to France. It came as an aftermath, as an issue from the emotional storm that descended upon him in France. As that storm subsided, the outraged feelings sought compensation in memories; and then, at first slowly, then riotously, the treasury of his unconscious mind, so richly stored in childhood, was opened and given forth in the poetry of one wonderful decade.

Such is the main theme of this book. Wordsworth was a poet, and a supreme poet, for a limited period of about ten years. This period does not emerge gradually out of his youth or adolescence. It begins almost suddenly at the age of twenty-seven; it comes to an end, just as suddenly, at the age of thirty-seven. If we can explain the origin and sustaining cause of this brilliant phase, we shall have come near to understanding the nature of that process of the mind inadequately known as 'inspiration.' Wordsworth himself could not understand it. It is perhaps presumption for others to try. But there is no harm in pointing out the inconsis-

tencies of Wordsworth's own ideas of which the chief is the theory of a guardian Nature. There is confessional significance in the 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey,' the first great poem written by Wordsworth. It was composed in July, 1798, five years after his first visit to the banks of the Wye. That first visit took place, therefore, in 1793, the year following his return from France, where overwhelming experiences, which I shall consider in the next chapter, had been his lot. This year 1793 has been shrouded in deliberate mystery – by Wordsworth himself and by his official biographers. We only know that it was a year of unsettled habits, of strange disappearances and unexpected silences. We know that his mind must have been in a state of extraordinary turmoil – emotional and intellectual turmoil. In this state of mind he went on a tour in the West of England as companion to William Calvert, and during the course of this tour Wordsworth first saw Tintern Abbey and the valley of the Wye. I conceive that it was then that Wordsworth first realised that intimate communion with natural beauty which was to be the mainspring of his poetry and the source of his original philosophy. I think we can best describe his state as one of intense sensational awareness. He was exhausted by his experiences in France; or rather he was excited to a pitch of

emotional sensitiveness that made every sight and sound acute beyond belief. It was a state of sensational ecstasy and on the basis of this purely physical experience, he built up his philosophy of nature and his theory of the development of the individual mind. Both were, in a sense, rationalistic; that is to say, by the law of association everything followed from the primary physical sensations – everything, perhaps, except the final intuition of that dark inscrutable workmanship which reconciles discordant elements. But in 1793 he had no need of any synthesis of his sensations. When he first came to the Wye Valley, Wordsworth relates in his poem,

> . . . like a roe
> I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides
> Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
> Wherever nature led; more like a man
> Flying from something that he dreads, than one
> Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then
> (The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,
> And their glad animal movements all gone by),
> To me was all in all.

In nature he found the reflection of his passions:

> The sounding cataract
> Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,

The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite: a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, or any interest
Unborrowed from the eye.

It was the duration, the lastingness of the impressions derived from this passionate fusion with the forms of nature, the 'aching joys,' the 'dizzy raptures,' which was to sustain him in the difficult years of his moral crisis – and not merely as 'sensations sweet, felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,' bringing 'tranquil restoration' to his mind, but also as a

. . . blessed mood
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lighten'd: that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul . . .

In attempting to put the childhood of Wordsworth into its proper perspective, I have been

led to anticipate the course of events in his life. But the events of 1791–1792, and the mental crisis that endured for the following five or six years, tend to render insignificant all the events that precede this period. I think they render insignificant the four years that Wordsworth spent in Cambridge. The references to this period in the *Autobiographical Memoranda* are extremely casual:

'In the month of October, 1787, I was sent to St. John's College, Cambridge, of which my uncle Dr. Cookson, had been a fellow. The master, Dr. Chevalier, died very soon after . . .' Wordsworth then explains why he did not compose some verses for the occasion. He then tells us that before coming to Cambridge he had read the first six books of Euclid, with the exception of the fifth, had learnt simple and quadratic equations in algebra, and that this was unfortunate, because it gave him a twelvemonths start on the freshmen of his year, and accordingly he got into 'rather an idle way; reading nothing but classic authors according to my fancy, and Italian poetry.' He took to these studies and under the guidance of his tutor translated two or three papers of the *Spectator* into Italian. Of his four years at Cambridge, he says not a word more in these prosaic *Memoranda.*

But in the *Prelude* he has much to say about the

same period – too much. The whole of the Third Book is devoted to his *Residence at Cambridge*, and it is easily the feeblest part of the whole poem – vague, repetitious, and often resorting to what would-be playful, heavy humour which is the worst disfigurement of his poetry. Wordsworth is on the defensive – even the Wordsworth of 1805. He feels that it is hard to justify his conduct during those four years, and yet he does not wish to put the blame upon his own disposition. He vacillates between one attitude and another – it is painfully obvious in comparing the 1805–6 version with the 1850 version.

In the 1805 version he admits that from the beginning of his stay in Cambridge he had melancholy thoughts –

> . . . a strangeness in my mind,
> A feeling that I was not for that hour,
> Nor for that place.

'But wherefore be cast down?' he cries, 'why should I grieve?' And then follows this defiant passage, which later he suppressed:

> 'I was a chosen Son.
> For hither I had come with holy powers
> And faculties, whether to work or feel:
> To apprehend all passions and all moods

Which time, and place, and season do impress
Upon the visible universe, and work
Like changes there by force of my own mind.
I was a Freeman; in the purest sense
Was free, and to majestic ends was strong.
I do not speak of learning, moral truth,
Or understanding; 'twas enough for me
To know that I was otherwise endowed.
When the first glitter of the show was passed,
And the first dazzle of the taper light,
As if with a rebound my mind return'd
Into its former self.

III, 82–97 (1805).

Obviously a young man with a good conceit of himself! With his rough manners, his ungainly figure, his northern burr – he can hardly have been an attractive creature. And yet he says that he threw himself willingly into the social life of the University:

Companionships,
Friendships, acquaintances, were welcome all.
We sauntered, played, or rioted; we talked
Unprofitable talk at morning hours;
Drifted about along the streets and walks,
Read lazily in trivial books, went forth
To gallop through the country in blind zeal
Of senseless horsemanship, or on the breast

Of Cam sailed boisterously, and let the stars
Come forth, perhaps without one quiet thought.
III, 249-258 (1850).

All this seems normal enough; Wordsworth even confesses to drinking too much in honour of Milton 'one afternoon,' and in consequence being late for Chapel! He takes pompous delight in that confession, and exclaims:

Empty thoughts!
I am ashamed of them: and that great Bard,
And thou, O Friend! who in thy ample mind
Hast placed me high above my best deserts,
Ye will forgive the weakness of that hour,
In some of its unworthy varieties,
Brother to many more.
III, 318-323 (1850).

Whatever the general level of morals at Cambridge in those days, I cannot believe that Wordsworth committed any serious indiscretions. He merely vegetated. In his own words, 'imagination slept.' No doubt he was affected by the spirit of the place; he says:

I could not print
Ground where the grass had yielded to the steps
Of generations of illustrious men,
Unmoved.

No doubt, too, he read widely if not wisely, and stored his mind with images that were to enrich his subsequent poetry. In a suppressed passage* he speaks of

> . . . visits paid
> Remissly, at chance seasons, to a friend
> Unsettled in the heart by cozenage
> Of new affections;

and again:

> Worst of all, a treasonable growth
> Of indecisive judgments, that impaired
> And shook the mind's simplicity.
> III, 214-216 (1850).

But looking back on his Cambridge days across the vivid revelation of his French experiences, those days seemed largely wasted. A 'deep vacation,' a calm before the storm. And yet not utterly wasted, for they made so much easier the transition between the 'smooth delights and wild outlandish walks of simple youth,' and the 'conflicts of substantial life.' 'A midway residence with all its intervenient imagery' did lead on, by a more just gradation, to higher things. Wordsworth reached his twenty-first year without ever

* De Sélincourt, p. 81, n.

having had to submit to any repressive discipline. It would be difficult to find, among our famous men, one so blessed with early liberty. This youth, eager in mind and body, reached the fullness of his manhood in passion and in pride unchecked. At the end of his time at Cambridge we can be fairly sure that he had already freed his mind from the repressive conventions of his religion. He faced the world, his poise maintained only by his instinctive reserve. It is no wonder that this last barrier fell before the emotional storms that then descended upon him.

CHAPTER II

A VAGRANT TENT

Well pleased to pitch a vagrant tent among
The unfenced regions of society.
Prelude VII, 56–7.

CHAPTER II

A VAGRANT TENT

WORDSWORTH, Shelley, Keats – these names are so often grouped together as the trinity of English Romanticism that we forget that Wordsworth really belonged to an earlier generation. He was already twenty-two when Shelley was born, and twenty-five when Keats was born. Wordsworth belongs to the eighteenth century in a very real sense; Shelley and Keats are entirely children of a new age. When, in 1787, Wordsworth began to compose his first considerable poem, it was in the calm that had given birth to Crabbe's *Village* and Cowper's *Task*. Dr. Johnson, in whom the tradition of a century had reached its final definition, was only just dead. It was hard to escape from such a weight of accepted authority. Wordsworth did not try. His first poem, which he finished in his twentieth year, has not the slightest gleam of originality. It is a tame exercise in conformity; its only excesses are feeblenesses – exaggerations of the mannerisms of a defunct style. The conceits that spring

from an excess of spirit in a style, as in Dryden, or Pope, are one thing, and an admirable thing; the same conceits produced by rule of thumb to conform to a pattern, are merely a weariness of the flesh. No one has ever had a good word to say for *An Evening Walk*; I am not perverse enough to attempt to supply one. The juvenilia of most poets are better forgotten, but in no poet is the distance between their highest and their lowest achievements so great as in Wordsworth. From 1787 to 1789 his imagination continued to sleep: it needed a revolution to wake it.

And a revolution is exactly what it got. On July 14th, 1789, midway through Wordsworth's university career, the Bastille fell.

> The dread Bastille,
> With all the chambers in its horrid towers,
> Fell to the ground – by violence overthrown
> Of indignation; and with shouts that drowned
> The crash it made in falling!
>
> *Excursion* III, 709-13.

We do not know to what extent, if any, Wordsworth was sympathetically prepared for this event: – the suppressed passage from the *Prelude* about 'the treasonable growth of indecisive judgments' may refer to the period subsequent to the fall of the Bastille. At the time in question

he was spending his holiday at Penrith, discovering the wonderful virtues of his sister Dorothy, from whom he had hitherto been so much separated. It was probably only after his return to Cambridge at the end of the Long Vacation that the full significance of the event came home to him. He found the University in a ferment. What are we to imagine were his immediate reactions?

He was hardly likely to have been carried away by enthusiasm. He was not, when all is said and done, enthusiastic by nature. His emotions were held in check by his native reserve, and in any case, on this particular occasion, he would not feel anything but a vague stirring. We have no reason to suppose that his ideas on society and politics had yet crystallised into any definite form. He would probably have said, at this period, and with the lofty assurance that a youth of his age can assume about such matters, that he was not interested in politics. He was not even particularly interested in books, and among the few that he mentions in the *Prelude* and his *Autobiographical Memoranda*, not one is a book of ideas. A whole section of the *Prelude* is devoted to *Books*, but the only ones definitely mentioned there are *Don Quixote*, *Euclid's Elements* and – 'A slender abstract of the Arabian Tales.' There is no reason to suppose that before

his first visit to France Wordsworth had read any of the works of Rousseau, much less those of obscurer precursors of the French Revolution. In fact, we may state it as a general characteristic of the man, that Wordsworth never came to a position by a theoretical approach. His emotions were first involved: he justified himself rationally at a later stage.

The most important effect of the French Revolution on Wordsworth was indirect. It induced him to set out on an expedition to the Alps. Or rather, it induced him to set out on that expedition at the time he did – in the long vacation of 1790, his last long vacation at College, and a period usually devoted to more serious pursuits. He himself had an uneasy conscience about this truancy, and wrote in the *Prelude:*

> A hardy slight
> Did this unprecedented course imply
> Of college studies and their set rewards;
> Nor had, in truth, the scheme been formed by me
> Without uneasy forethought of the pain,
> The censures, and ill-omening of those
> To whom my wordly interests were dear.
> But Nature then was sovereign in my mind,
> And mighty forms, seizing a youthful fancy,

Had given a charter to irregular hopes.
In any age of uneventful calm
Among the nations, surely would my heart
Have been possessed by similar desire;
But Europe at that time was thrilled with joy,
France standing on the top of golden hours,
And human nature seeming born again.

VI, 326–41.

This implies that though the desire to see the Alps would have been strong at any time, the impulse was made irresistible by the light of glory streaming from that land of liberty through which the poet must go.

But once in France, Wordsworth made a bee-line for Switzerland. He landed in Calais on July 13th, accompanied by a fellow-collegian named Robert Jones, a Welshman. They set out the following day on a forced march, and completed 350 miles in exactly two weeks. They reached Savoy by the beginning of August, and then spent six weeks exploring the mountains and lakes of that country, of northern Italy and of Switzerland. They reached Basle on September 21st, and then went down the Rhine in a rowing boat as far as Cologne, from whence they struck across country once more, arriving in England again about October 10th.

From Switzerland Wordsworth wrote a long letter to Dorothy which has been preserved, and

this letter gives us a very clear notion of the state of mind he was in during this tour. 'My spirits,' he writes, 'have been kept in a perpetual hurry of delight, by the almost uninterrupted succession of sublime and beautiful objects which have passed before my eyes during the course of the last month.' After an enthusiastic description of the lake of Como he remarks: 'My mind ran through a thousand dreams of happiness, which might be enjoyed upon its banks, if heightened by conversation and the exercise of social affections. Among the more awful silences of the Alps, I had not a thought of man, or a single created being; my whole soul was turned to Him who produced the terrible majesty before me. But I am too particular for the limits of my paper.' (This last sentence is a typical example of the abrupt transition from the sublime to the ridiculous so common in Wordsworth). He goes on to describe the rest of his tour, and then, in flat contradiction to the statement just quoted, says to Dorothy: 'I have thought of you perpetually; and never have my eyes burst upon a scene of particular loveliness but I have almost instantly wished that you could for a moment be transported to the place where I stood to enjoy it.' He then speaks of his regret at leaving these scenes: 'I am a perfect enthusiast in my admiration of nature in all her various forms; and

I have looked upon, and, as it were, conversed with, the objects which this country has presented to my view so long, and with such increasing pleasure, that the idea of parting from them oppresses me with a sadness similar to what I have always felt in quitting a beloved friend.'

It is not necessary to remind you of the fact that enthusiasm of the kind expressed by Wordsworth in this letter was an affectation of the period, and there is no doubt that Wordsworth was affected with the rest of them. It is significant that when during the course of the following three years he set himself to compose a poem descriptive of this tour, his impressions were so far from being vivid that he had recourse to the picturesque accounts of Ramond de Carbonnières, a French traveller with an intimate knowledge of the Alps. It is true that Wordsworth himself admits this debt in his notes to *Descriptive Sketches*, but it remained for Professor Legouis to show how extensive this debt was, and how close to Ramond's original some of Wordsworth's actual phrasing is. That is of no great significance. But plagiarism apart, what is to be said of this second considerable poem that Wordsworth wrote?

In the first place, we must observe that it was partly written after Wordsworth's second visit to France, in 1792. It was published in 1793. It

is one of those poems of his which he continually meddled with. The original text was materially changed by Wordsworth in the edition of 1815, and again altered in 1820, 1827, 1832, 1836, 1845, and 1849. With all this anxious care, he never made it a good poem, and came near to making it a false one. In the original edition there are passages which betray his sensual nature:

> Farewell! those forms that, in thy noon-tide shade,
> Rest, near their little plots of wheaten glade;
> Those steadfast eyes, that beating breasts inspire
> To throw the 'sultry ray' of young desire;
> Those lips, whose tides of fragrance come,
> Accordant to the cheek's unquiet glow;
> Those shadowy breasts in love's soft light array'd,
> And rising, by the moon of passion sway'd.

This is extravagant, perhaps, but at least inspired by a modicum of adolescent feeling. That modicum was sacrificed to his later prudence, and there is little of such inspiration in the rest of the poem. As Professor Legouis has shown, it is a mosaic of images and epithets drawn from Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton, and from a host of later poets such as Lady Winchelsea,

Collins, Gray, Thomson, Pope, Young, Home, Smollett, Beattie, and two French poets, Delille and Rosset. There are a few good lines, such as:

> The west that burns like one dilated sun . . .

and –

> Mocks the dull ear of Time with deaf abortive sound . . .

Here and there is a descriptive passage which seems to be in some measure 'felt' – the one I will quote is significantly enough an interpolation based on the 1792 visit to France –

> Yes, as I roam'd where Loiret's waters glide
> Thro' rustling aspins heard from side to side,
> When from October clouds a milder light
> Fell where the blue flood rippled into white,
> Methought from every cot the watchful bird
> Crowed with ear-piercing power till then unheard;
> Each clacking mill, that broke the murmuring streams,
> Rock'd the charm'd thought in more delightful dreams;
> Chasing those long long dreams the falling leaf
> Awoke a fainter pang of moral grief . . .

That has an elegaic prettiness which in a lesser poet than Wordsworth we might prize. But how it is reduced to insignificance by the following passage from the *Prelude*, descriptive of this same tour, but written seven years later:

> The brook and road
> Were fellow-travellers in this gloomy Pass,
> And with them did we journey several hours
> At a slow step. The immeasurable height
> Of woods decaying, never to be decay'd,
> The stationary blasts of water-falls
> And everywhere along the hollow rent
> Winds thwarting winds, bewilder'd and forlorn,
> The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
> The rocks that mutter'd close upon our ears,
> Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
> As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
> And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
> The unfetter'd clouds, and region of the
> Heavens,
> Tumult and peace, and darkness and the light
> Were all like workings of one mind, the features
> Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
> Characters of the great Apocalypse,
> The types and symbols of Eternity,
> Of first and last, and midst, and without end.*

* VI, 553–72 (1805), but dated 1799 by Wordsworth. See De Sèlincourt, 542.

It is difficult to measure the distance between those two examples of Wordsworth's poetry – one the work of a man of twenty-two, the other the work of a man of twenty-nine. Can we ascribe the difference merely to a progress in technical perfection? I do not think so. There is no vital change in the style of any artist that is not preceded by a change of heart. This change in Wordsworth amounted to something quite apocalyptic – a sudden perception of glory. Wordsworth was fully aware of the nature of the change that had been wrought in him, and in this very book of the *Prelude* from which I have just quoted, he inserts a passage which reads like the description of a saint's mystical conversion. He and his companion had been climbing up the Simplon pass. They had become detached from their guide and had grown uncertain of their way. While in doubt, they meet a peasant and question him; from his answer they learn that they had crossed the Alps. Then comes this invocation:

> Imagination! lifting up itself
> Before the eye and progress of my Song
> Like an unfather'd vapour; here that Power,
> In all the might of its endowments, came
> Athwart me; I was lost as in a cloud,
> Halted, without a struggle to break through.

And now recovering, to my soul I say
I recognise thy glory; in such strength
Of usurpation, in such visitings
Of awful promise, when the light of sense
Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
The invisible world, doth Greatness make abode,
There harbours whether we be young or old.
Our destiny, our nature, and our home
Is with infinitude, and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be.
The mind beneath such banners militant
Thinks not of spoils or trophies, nor of aught
That may attest its prowess, blest in thoughts
That are their own perfection and reward,
Strong in itself, and in the access of joy
Which hides it like the overflowing Nile.

VI, 525-48 (1805).

There is more here than the somewhat jejeune enthusiasm for the beauties of nature expressed in the letter to Dorothy, written on the spot. We can conclude that the Wordsworth of 1805, wishing to give an impressive setting to this mystical experience, which probably occurred to him in his back orchard ten years later, transferred it to this particular time and place in the Alps. It is not difficult to combine in one work of art

the visual memory of particular objects with the separate experience of purely subjective emotions – in fact, the poet is always doing this and it is in a sense the secret of his art – the co-ordination of distinct factors of visual imagination and emotional experience.

Wordsworth returned to Cambridge and took his degree on January 21st, 1791. In a letter written a few weeks later, Dorothy says:

'William, you may have heard, lost the chance (indeed the certainty) of a fellowship, by not combating his inclinations. He gave way to his natural dislike to studies so dry as many parts of mathematics, consequently could not succeed at Cambridge. He reads Italian, Spanish, French, Greek, Latin and English, but never opens a mathematical book. We promise ourselves much pleasure from reading Italian together at some time. He wishes that I was acquainted with the Italian poets, but how much I have to learn which plain English will teach me! William has a great attachment for poetry; so indeed has Kit, but William particularly, which is not the most likely thing to produce his advancement in the world.'

His advancement in the world must at this time have been giving Wordsworth considerable anxiety. His mind was now thoroughly unsettled – by the events in France, after the fall of the

Bastille, by his growing interest in the literature of republicanism, by his visit to France where:

> All hearts were open, every tongue was loud
> With amity and glee . . .

He had neglected his mathematics to read, not only the Italian poets, but now undoubtedly much of Rousseau, and the *Rights of Man* (1790-2), and Erasmus Darwin's *Loves of the Plants* (1789), all tending in the direction of Deism. Everything points to the probability that by the end of 1790, Wordsworth was a convinced deist, which we may take as an eighteenth-century euphemism for atheist.* Why otherwise should he abandon the career for which he had all along been destined – the Church? It is true that at first he gave as an excuse that he was not yet of age, but the letter in which he makes this excuse (to his friend Mathews under the date Sept. 23rd, 1791) has been censored at the critical point, so we must conclude that the statement as it stands is only partial. In this state of indecision he determined to go to London, and there he stayed for about four months,

* He openly confesses as much in *Descriptive Sketches*, where, addressing the pilgrims that resort to the shrine of Einsiedeln, he writes :

> " Without one hope her written griefs to blot,
> Save in the land where all things are forgot,
> My heart, alive to transports long unknown,
> Half wishes your delusion were its own." (676-9)

Well pleased to pitch a vagrant tent among
The unfenced regions of society.

Book VII of the *Prelude* is devoted to this period, but it does not tell us much of significance – not much, I mean, about his state of mind at this time. He says he was:

In no disturbance of excessive hope,
At ease from all ambition personal,
Frugal as there was need, and though self-will'd,
Yet temperate and reserv'd, and wholly free
From dangerous passions.

VII, 68-73 (1805).

The rest is merely an inspired guide-book to the sights of eighteenth-century London, with the long and irrelevant story of the Maiden of Buttermere thrown in. He ends with a description of St. Bartholomew's fair, and in its jumble finds a true comparison for the whole city:

Oh, blank confusion! true epitome
Of what the mighty City is herself
To thousands upon thousands of her sons,
Living amid the same perpetual whirl
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
To one identity, by differences

That have no law, no meaning, and no end –
Oppression, under which even highest minds
Must labour, whence the strongest are not free.
VI, 722-730 (1850).

He then draws the moral: the only escape from this oppression comes from that virtue instilled by the habitual influence of the forms of nature – 'the forms perennial of the ancient hills,' and 'the changeful language of their countenances.' So though the confusion of the city is

. . . by nature an unmanageable sight,
It is not wholly so to him who looks
In steadiness, who hath among least things
An under-sense of greatness; sees the parts
As parts, but with a feeling for the whole.
VII, 732-6 (1850).

And this capacity, he claims, was his, by virtue of the early education he had received:

Attention springs,
And comprehensiveness and memory flow,
From early converse with the works of God
Among all regions; chiefly where appear
Most obviously simplicity and power.
VII, 740-4 (1850).

But here again I feel that we are getting away

from the actual Wordsworth of 1791, and seeing only the idealization of that figure made fourteen years later. The actual Wordsworth, however, can only be reconstructed from the ideal, and from the very meagre documents belonging to this period. It is a very different Wordsworth that then takes shape. Even so considerate a biographer of the poet as Professor Legouis speaks with severity at this point. He says: 'Apparently none of Wordsworth's biographers have laid sufficient stress upon the waywardness he displayed at this period of his life. It is so customary to regard him as having been a model for poets in the matter of a regular and dutiful life, that they pass over his refractory youth without dwelling upon the obstinate refusal with which he met every suggestion of practical wisdom. Wordsworth's vocation, like that of most other poets, made itself known through revolt. He had, as others had, his hours, his years of disobedience, obstinacy, and rash defiance of fortune. Like them he was a cause of anxiety to those around him; and by his relations was long regarded as the stubborn and presumptuous young man who would "turn out badly." '*

He was to justify their worst fears! Wordsworth left London towards the end of May to spend some weeks with his friend Robert Jones, who

* *Early Life*, pp. 163–4.

lived in Wales. Afterwards he went on a walking tour with this friend through North Wales, and the tour was pretty extensive. We do not know whether he returned to London again, but by September he was back at Cambridge once more. On October 9th Dorothy writes in a letter:

'I know not when my brother William will go into the North; probably not so soon as he intends, as he is going to begin a new course of study, which he may perhaps not be able to go on with so well in that part of the world, as I conjecture he may find it difficult to meet with the books. He is going, by the advice of my Uncle William, to study the Oriental languages.'

It has been assumed* that Oriental languages meant Hebrew, and that divinity was the end ordained by his uncle. But in a letter written to his friend Mathews in November, Wordsworth distinctly states that 'My uncle, the clergyman, proposed to me a short time ago to begin a course of Oriental literature, thinking that that was the best field for a person to distinguish himself in, as a man of letters.' Divinity, it seems, was definitely abandoned. But the new prospect did not please Wordsworth any better. In the same letter he continues: 'But what must I do amongst that immense wilderness, I who have no resolution, and have not prepared myself for

* Cf. Harper, I, 120.

the enterprise by any sort of discipline amongst the western languages? who know little of Latin, and scarce anything of Greek. A pretty confession for a young gentleman whose whole life ought to have been devoted to study. And thus the world wags.'

This letter was written from Brighton. Wordsworth was on his way to Orleans in France, where he proposed to stay the winter. The decision seems to have been sudden and there is nothing to explain it. We can only assume his continued restlessness, an increasing interest in French affairs, and perhaps a belief that by acquiring a knowledge of the country and its language, he would fit himself for some vague employment, such as tutoring or journalism. There is nothing to explain why he went to Orleans in particular, except that the people of Orleans were reputed to speak with a pure accent. In December Dorothy writes to her friend: 'William is, I hope, by this time arrived in Orleans, where he means to pass the winter for the purpose of learning the French language, which will qualify him for the office of travelling companion to some young gentleman, if he can get recommended; it will at any rate be very useful to him, and as he can live at as little expense in France as in England, or nearly so, the scheme is not an ineligible one. He is at the

same time engaged in the study of the Spanish language, and if he settles in England on his return (I mean, if he has not the opportunity of becoming a travelling tutor) he will begin the study of the Oriental languages.'

Wordsworth's own account of his stay in France in the *Autobiographical Memoranda* is as colourless as he could make it:

'In the autumn of 1791 I went to Paris, where I stayed some little time, and then went on to Orleans, with a view of being out of the way of my own countrymen, that I might learn to speak the language fluently. At Orleans, and Blois, and Paris, on my return, I passed fifteen or sixteen months. It was a stirring time. The King was dethroned when I was at Blois, and the massacres of September took place when I was at Orleans, but for these matters also see the Poem. I came home before the execution of the King.'

In these calm tones he described the most fateful period of his life. His nephew the Bishop, who wrote his *Memoirs* of Wordsworth's life, carried discretion to suspicious limits. A passage like the following by its excessive care betrays the agitation it seeks to hide:

'Wordsworth's condition in France was a very critical one: he was an orphan, young, inexperienced, impetuous, enthusiastic, with no friendly voice to guide him, in a foreign country, and

that country in a state of revolution; and this revolution, it must be remembered, had not only taken up arms against the monarchy and other ancient institutions, but had declared war against Christianity. The most licentious theories were propounded; all restraints were broken; libertinism was law. He was encompassed with strong temptations; and though it is not the design of the present work to chronicle the events of his life except so far as they illustrate his writings, yet I could not pass over this period of it without noticing the dangers which surround those who in an ardent emotion of enthusiasm put themselves in a position of peril, without due consideration of the circumstances which ought to regulate their practice.'

This, so far as we can reconstruct the events, is what actually happened: Wordsworth reached Paris on the last day of November, 1791. There he stayed five days, to see the sights and to breathe in the atmosphere of revolutionary zeal. He visited the National Assembly and saw

> . . . the Revolutionary Power
> Toss like a ship at anchor, rocked by storms;

He

> . . . coasted round and round the line
> Of Tavern, Brothel, Gaming-house, and Shop,

> Great rendezvous of worst and best, the walk
> Of all who had a purpose, or had not;
> I stared and listened, with a stranger's ears,
> To Hawkers and Haranguers, hubbub wild!
> And hissing Factionists with ardent eyes,
> In knots, or pairs, or single.
>
> IX, 53-60 (1850).

Then Wordsworth proceeded to Orleans, where his first business was to seek cheap lodgings. These he eventually found in a house where he had 'two or three officers of the cavalry and a young gentleman of Paris' as fellow-lodgers. But in his search for lodgings he made the acquaintance of a 'family which I find very agreeable,' but whose terms were too dear. However, he was invited to spend his evenings there, and this enabled him to dispense with a master of French. He says as much in a letter which he wrote to his brother on December 19th. Now I think we may fairly assume that the family in question was that of a certain Paul Vallon and that in the same house was staying Paul's sister Annette, a vivacious young lady of twenty-five. In any case, it is certain that Wordsworth quickly made the acquaintance of Annette Vallon, that he found her a willing teacher of the French language, and in short, as he says in his letter to his brother: 'I have every prospect of liking

this place extremely well; the country tho' flat is pleasant, and abounds in agreeable walks, especially by the side of the Loire, which is a very magnificent river.' The natural thing happened: teacher and pupil fell in love with each other, and before many weeks had passed Annette, in Wordsworth's own elegant phrasing:

> . . . wanting yet the name of wife
> Carried about her for a secret grief,
> The promise of a mother.

Annette was the daughter of a surgeon of Blois, but her father was dead, and her mother had married again. She was therefore somewhat unprotected. In the spring of 1792 Annette returned to her home in Blois, and thither Wordsworth followed her, to be near her. He seems to have been in Blois about seven months. He was still there on September 3rd. Then, because her condition could no longer be disguised, and to avoid a scandal in her native city, Annette went once more to Orleans, and Wordsworth went with her. There, on December 15th, a daughter was born, and christened Anne Caroline Wordwodsth (*sic*). Paul Vallon stood godfather to the child, but Wordsworth himself had fled to Paris. He was there by the end of October and remained there for about two months – in fact, until he

had had news of his daughter's birth. Then he hastened to England.

That is a brief outline of what happened to Wordsworth in France during the course of 1792. Much else happened to him, as we shall see when we come to deal with the development of his opinions during this period. But nothing happened comparable in importance with this love affair. It transformed his being; I think that this passion and all its melancholy aftermath was the deepest experience of Wordsworth's life – the emotional complex from which all his subsequent career flows in its intricacy and uncertainty. It was this experience which Wordsworth saw fit to hide – to bury in the most complete secrecy and mask with a long-sustained hypocrisy. He was well supported by those few friends who knew the secret during his life; he continued to be supported after his death by his descendants and official biographers. There were underground rumours; unexplained references in letters and in Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journals*. But the facts have only become generally known during the last fourteen years, through the researches of Professor Harper and Professor Legouis. We now know the bare facts, but so efficiently have all traces of the liaison been expunged from the records of the poet himself, that we are left with little or nothing to explain

these facts. Why didn't Wordsworth marry Annette? Why did he desert her as soon as the child was born? How can we explain his conduct during this year in France; how can we condone his conduct in the years that followed? It is possible that if he had not so completely covered his tracks, the real motives underlying his actions would be more creditable than those we are compelled to assign to him. Why pry into the matter at all? it may be asked. I have already answered that question. Wordsworth, as a character and as a poet, is inexplicable without this key to his emotional development. With this key he becomes, not indeed, a rational being, but a man whose thwarted emotions found an external and objective compensation in his poetry.

I shall leave to the next chapter the explanation I have to offer of the part played in Wordsworth's life by the Annette episode, and the indirect effects it had on his poetry. For the moment I merely want to glance at whatever direct evidence of the experience survives in Wordsworth's poetry, in spite of his careful attempts to suppress the facts. Such evidence is almost entirely confined to one poem, that known as *Vaudracour and Julia*. Hitherto regarded as one of his dullest poems (Arnold thought it was his very worst) it has suddenly taken on a new

interest. It remains a bad poem – one more warning, if that were needed, of the danger of attempting a direct transcript of one's own emotional experience. But it is no longer a dull poem. It is almost a 'human document.'

According to the chronology of the *Prelude* established by Professor de Sélincourt, the original draft of *Vaudracour and Julia* must have been written about April, 1804, though it is possible that a notebook from which several pages have been torn contained an earlier version. It was originally intended as part of the *Prelude*, and is found in Book IX of the 1805 version, where it occupies 380 lines, thus making Book IX disproportionately long. In 1820, Wordsworth published the poem separately, with the following odd note:

'The following tale was written as an Episode, in a work from which its length may perhaps exclude it. The facts are true; no inventions as to these has been exercised, as none was needed.'

In the notes dictated to Miss Fenwick late in his life, the tracks are covered still more circumstantially:

'Faithfully narrated, though with the omission of many pathetic circumstances, from the mouth of a French lady, who had been an eye- and ear-witness of all that was done and said. Many long

years after I was told that Dupligne was then a monk in the Convent of La Trappe.'

This Dupligne is a mystery, for such a character does not appear in the poem. Was Wordsworth's memory reverting to some still more complete version of the poem which he had taken care to destroy?

The poem was published separately in 1820. The alterations, compared with the 1805 version, are considerable. It is cut down to 308 lines (instead of 380), and there is much revision of what remains. The story is a simple one of frustrated love; Vaudracour and Julia, who had grown up together in a small town in the heart of France, fall desperately in love with each other. Their union is opposed by Vaudracour's father, on the ground that one of the nobility cannot demean himself by marrying a maiden of no rank. The ecstatic nature of Vaudracour's love is described by Wordsworth in lines of unusually sensuous beauty:

Earth lived in one great presence of the spring,
Life turn'd the meanest of her implements
Before his eyes to price above all gold,
The house she dwelt in was a sainted shrine,
Her chamber-window did surpass in glory
The portals of the East, all paradise
Could by the single opening of a door

Let itself in upon him, pathways, walks,
Swarm'd with enchantment till his spirit sank
Beneath the burden, overbless'd for life.

The lovers, Wordsworth goes on to relate, finally rebelled against the unjust veto, either 'through effect of some delirious hour,' or because the youth in his desperation,

Seeing so many bars betwixt himself
And the dear haven where he wished to be,

decided to entrust himself

To Nature for a happy end of all.

Nature responded in the usual way, and an illegitimate child was born to Julia. The rest of the poem is taken up with plots for concealments, stolen interviews, the tyranny of Vaudracour's father, a thousand fears and hopes, coming finally to a ridiculous conclusion, with Julia in a convent, and Vaudracour retiring with the child to a lodge deep in the forest. There, after a short time the child, 'by some mistake, or indiscretion of the father, died,' and Vaudracour wasted his days in those solitary shades 'an imbecile mind.'

All this was excluded from the final version of

the *Prelude*. The few lines that Wordsworth inserted to cover the gap are not without their significance. He refers to the tale of *Vaudracour and Julia* and says:

> Thou, also, there mayst read,
> At leisure, how the enamoured youth was driven,
> By public power abased, to fatal crime,
> Nature's rebellion against monstrous law;
> How, between heart and heart, oppression thrust
> Her mandates, severing whom true love had joined,
> Harassing both; until he sank and pressed
> The couch his fate had made for him; supine,
> Save when the stings of viperous remorse,
> Trying their strength, enforced him to start up,
> Aghast and prayerless.
>
> IX, 568-578 (1850).

The tale of *Vaudracour and Julia* differs in many details from the tale of Wordsworth and Annette, but the main feelings involved are the same; the same delirious passion, the same sense of frustration, the same atmosphere of intrigue and concealment, and then a forced parting and 'the stings of viperous remorse, trying their strength.' In the Book X of the *Prelude* Wordsworth relates

how during the course of the Revolutionary Terror his soul was sick:

> Most melancholy at that time, O Friend!
> Were my day-thoughts, my dreams were
> miserable;
> Through months, through years, long after the
> last beat
> Of those atrocities (I speak bare truth,
> As if to thee alone in private talk)
> I scarcely had one night of quiet sleep
> Such ghastly visions had I of despair
> And tyranny, and implements of death,
> And long orations which in dreams I pleaded
> Before unjust Tribunals, with a voice
> Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense,
> Of treachery and desertion in the place
> The holiest that I knew of, my own soul.
>
> x, 369-81 (1805).

'The stings of viperous remorse,' and this voice pleading, this death-like sense of treacherous desertion felt in that last place of refuge, his own soul – need we probe further? These phrases reveal, as surely as words can reveal, the inner processes of this man's life, the overwhelming nature of his passion for Annette, the torn and anguished heart which he brought back to England at the end of this year 1792.

CHAPTER III

THE DEEPER MALADY

The deeper malady is better hid;
The world is poisoned at the heart.
The Borderers, 1035–6.

CHAPTER III

THE DEEPER MALADY

FRANCE declared war against England on February 1st, 1793. Wordsworth had been in England for about four weeks and now found himself trapped, unable to return to Annette. Why, in the first place, had he deserted her? He himself said that he returned to England 'dragged by a chain of harsh necessity.' In another place he says he withdrew unwillingly from France.' Knowing Wordsworth's circumlocutions for familiar things, we might assume that 'the chain of harsh necessity' was only lack of money. It is possible that he had sought his uncle's permission to marry Annette, and the poor clergyman, frightened out of his wits, had taken the extreme measure of refusing all supplies until the poet returned to his senses. That is mere supposition; the *Memoirs* of Christopher Wordsworth give us a more definite clue. His nephew writes: 'Reluctantly he tore himself from Paris'; and adds: 'If he had remained longer in the French capital he would, in all probability, have fallen a victim

among the Brissotins, with whom he was intimately connected.' He would hardly have recorded an intimate connection between Wordsworth and Brissot, one of the leaders of the Girondists, without good cause. It is possible that Brissot warned Wordsworth of the danger of a war against England. It is more likely that there is some truth in the story told by Alaric Watts* of 'an old Republican named Bailey . . . who had met Wordsworth in Paris, and having warned him that his connection with the Mountain rendered his situation there at that time perilous, the poet, he said, decamped with great precipitation.' Wordsworth was hardly likely to have been connected with the Mountain, because all his associations at Blois seem to have been with the Girondists, but that connection would have rendered his position equally, if not more dangerous. Taking everything into consideration, I feel that some hypothesis which supposes Wordsworth to have entered pretty deeply into revolutionary intrigues is the best explanation of his strange conduct and irregular movements at this time. On September 3rd, we find him writing calmly to his brother from Blois announcing his intention of coming to London during the course of the month of October to see about the publica-

* Quoted by Harper, I, 179–110. This statement may, however, refer to a visit in 1793 (see below, pp. 115–6).

tion of his poems. The arrangements were quite definite, and must have been suddenly cancelled. But not on account of Annette: the position with respect to her could not have been altered, and in any case, the poet went first to Paris. What is more likely than that he should have been entrusted with a mission by the Girondists of Blois; that once in touch with the leaders of the party in Paris, he was drawn into their intrigues; and that then he received the warning which drove him precipitately out of France? Once in England he busied himself with the arrangements for the publication of his poems, and we know that he confidently expected to make money out of the venture. Is it not likely that his pact with Annette was to this effect – that denied money by his uncle for the purpose of marrying her he would go to England and test his ability to make himself independent of this aid by the publication of his poems, and that he would then return to her? In the absence of any evidence, that is the most reasonable explanation I can offer, and certainly the two letters of Annette which have been discovered show clearly that Annette was expecting his almost immediate return. The declaration of war alone prevented it.

I have assumed, in all this, that Wordsworth had become a thorough-going republican during the course of his stay in France. There is no

evidence to show that he had progressed any distance in this direction before he left England: rather otherwise. He tells us that when he visited the Bastille on the way out he gathered up a stone, and pocketed the relic, in *the guise of* an enthusiast;

> . . . yet in honest truth,
> I looked for something I could not find,
> Affecting more emotion that I felt.

All the sights of Paris at this time, he goes on to say, recompensed him less than a certain painting of the Virgin by Charles Le Brun, a sentimental seventeenth-century version of the theme which Wordsworth described as:

> A beauty exquisitely wrought, with hair
> Dishevelled, gleaming eyes, and rueful cheek
> Pale and bedropped with overflowing tears.

But the one-sidedness of Wordsworth's aesthetic sensibility is often evident; he had no appreciation of either painting or music.

In Book VIII of the *Prelude* Wordsworth speaks of the noble types of mankind to which he had become accustomed in his youth:

> Happy in this, that I with Nature walk'd,
> Not having a too early intercourse
> With the deformities of crowded life,
> And those ensuing laughters and contempts

Self-pleasing, which if we would wish to think
With admiration and respect of man
Will not permit us.

VIII, 462-8 (1805).

Man was fair to him, he argues, because he was presented to him from the first in aspects that were great and fair. He goes on to say:

Yet do not deem, my Friend, though thus I speak
Of man as having taken in my mind
A place thus early which might almost seem
Pre-eminent, that it was really so.
Nature herself was at this unripe time
But secondary to my own pursuits
And animal activities, and all
Their trivial pleasures; and long afterwards
When these had died away, and Nature did
For her own sake become my joy, even then
And upwards then through late youth, until not less
Than three and twenty summers had been told
Was man in my affections and regards
Subordinate to her.

VIII, 471-484 (1805).

There you have a precise enough statement; Wordsworth says plainly enough that not until his twenty-third year, that is, in 1793, did Man

supplant Nature in his affections and regards. In the 1850 version of the *Prelude* twenty-three was altered to twenty-two, which gives us 1792 as the date, the very year of his residence in France. But that it was in France that he became a revolutionary republican is abundantly clear from Book IX of the *Prelude*; all that I have been concerned to establish for the moment is that it was not until he resided in France that his mind turned seriously to human affairs and political ideas.

At first he was indifferent to public events; his attention was engrossed by 'novelties in speech, domestic manners, customs, gestures, looks, and all the attire of ordinary life.' Like others, he had read, 'and eagerly sometimes, the master Pamphlets of the day,' but he had made no regular study of the course of events. For a short time he frequented the best and most punctilious society of Orleans;

> . . . but 'twas not long ere this
> Proved tedious, and I gradually withdrew
> Into a noisier world; and thus did soon
> Become a Patriot, and my heart was all
> Given to the People, and my love was theirs.
> (1805).

That, again, is plain enough, for to describe

yourself as a Patriot in those days was as though you were to call yourself a Bolshevik now.

The main agent in Wordsworth's conversion was a certain Michel Beaupuis. Staying in the same lodgings as Wordsworth, it will be remembered, were 'two or three officers of the cavalry,' and through these Wordsworth had been brought into contact with the officers' club or mess to which they belonged. Most of the officers were royalist by inclination and their talk was of emigration. But Beaupuis was an exception, and because of his republican sympathies, he was spurned by the rest. Wordsworth paints a vivid picture of this man. He was in the prime of manhood and in his younger days had 'sate Lord in many tender hearts.' But now he was blighted in mind and body; his frame stooping and contracted; his face that had once been beautiful now expressing the ravages of unhealthy and vexatious thoughts. His nervous disorder was such that:

> At the hour,
> The most important of each day, in which
> The public News was read, the fever came,
> A punctual visitant, to shake this Man,
> Disarm'd his voice, and fann'd his yellow cheek
> Into a thousand colours; while he read,
> Or mused, his sword was haunted by his touch

Continually, like an uneasy place
In his own body.

IX, 155-161 (1805).

But though burning with enthusiasm, Beaupuis was meek and placid by nature. Injuries had only made him more gracious.

Man he lov'd
As Man; and to the mean and the obscure
And all the homely in their homely works
Transferr'd a courtesy which had no air
Of condescension, but did rather seem
A passion and gallantry, like that
Which he, a Soldier, in his idler day
Had pay'd to Woman . . .

IX, 311-8 (1805).

With this man Wordsworth often discussed the questions that were agitating the public mind:

. . . the end
Of civil government, and its wisest forms,
Of ancient prejudice, and chartered rights,
Allegiance, faith, and law by time matured,
Custom and habit, novelty and change,
Of self-respect, and virtue in the Few
For partrimonial honour set apart,
And ignorance in the labouring Multitude.

IX, 327-34 (1805).

Wordsworth was converted, and once again we may note that it was not an act of reason, but of faith. It was the personal contact with this glowing sincerity in a man whom he could but admire that roused Wordsworth's enthusiasm for the rights of humanity. Fresh from this contact with Beaupuis he may have gone to Rousseau, or Paine or Godwin for reasons to buttress his enthusiasm; the first movement, however, was one of instinctive attraction to the personality of another man, an inspired leader of men.

This, then, is Wordsworth's position early in the year 1793: he is a great republican, a friend of France, and passionately in love with a French woman, by whom he has had a child. But England and France are at war, and he is on English soil, forcibly separated from all he is most devoted to. He had no home to go to; no profession to pursue. The person he could have turned to was his sister Dorothy, but she was with the very relatives from whom he was estranged. He hastened on the publications of his poems, and it seems that both volumes, *Descriptive Sketches* and *An Evening Walk*, had appeared before the end of February. They were published by Joseph Johnson, a radical free-thinker, whose house was a rendezvous of English republicans. About the same time appeared a Sermon by Dr.

Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, with an Appendix containing 'Strictures on the French Revolution,' being a defence of the British Constitution. It is probable that in the white heat of his indignation at the contents of this Appendix, which is no more than a broad-minded statement of conservative principles, Wordsworth sat down and wrote that 'Apology for the French Revolution' (in the form of an open letter to the Bishop, but never published in Wordsworth's lifetime) which is at once the most eloquent of his prose writings, and the most unequivocal statement of his full-grown republican sympathies. But we know nothing of Wordsworth's movements at this period. He may have stayed some time with his brother Richard, who was settled as a solicitor in London, but, as I have already remarked, we know that there was no sympathy between the brothers. On June 16th, Dorothy writes to her friend Miss Pollard: 'I cannot foresee the day of my felicity, the day on which I am once more to find a home under the same roof as my brother. All is still obscure and dark.'* Wordsworth kept out of the way, vainly looking for some employment, preferably as a tutor. He can have had little or no money, but he was always destined to be lucky in such difficulties. He fell in with an old schoolfellow of some means, William Calvert

* Harper, I, p. 199.

by name, and they went together on a tour in the west of England, Calvert bearing all the expenses. The tour was to have been a leisurely one, for Dorothy says in her letter that it will not be completed till October. They spent a month in the Isle of Wight; and then, on their way to Wales, they ran into a ditch and their carriage was broken. Calvert parted from Wordsworth, who then made his way across Salisbury Plain to Bath and Bristol and then up the Wye Valley to North Wales, where he stayed with his old friend, Robert Jones, until the beginning of October. It must have been about then that Wordsworth paid a flying visit to France.

The main evidence for this visit is a statement in Carlyle's *Reminiscences*, to the effect that Wordsworth told him that he had witnessed the execution of Gorsas, which took place on October 7th. It is quite a categorical statement: Carlyle writes: 'Wordsworth had been in France in the earlier or secondary stage of the Revolution; had witnessed the struggle of *Girondins* and *Mountain*, in particular the execution of Gorsas, 'the first *Deputy* sent to the scaffold'; and testified to the ominous feeling which that event produced in everybody, and of which he himself still seemed to retain something: 'Where will it *end*, when you have set an example in this kind?' I knew well about Gorsas; but had found, in my readings, no

trace of the public emotion his death excited; and perceived now that Wordsworth might be taken as a true supplement to my Book, on this small point.' This is all so definite, and Carlyle knew so well what he was talking about; he must have cross-questioned Wordsworth closely. I feel therefore, that we must accept this statement and its consequences.

It is confirmed, as Professor Harper has recently pointed out* by a letter written by Wordsworth on February 17th, 1794, to William Mathews.† In this letter Wordsworth writes 'When I received your letter in France . . .,' and 'I know not when I am likely to see you, as I am uncertain when I shall be in London; nor do I think it worth while to take my master's degree next summer' – this last statement implying, according to Professor Harper, that the letter could not have been written in any year previous to 1794. 'Other expressions in the letter,' Professor Harper remarks, 'indicate that a few weeks or months had passed since its writer had returned from France, thus confirming my opinion that he retreated from Paris in dismay after witnessing the execution of the Girondist Deputy Gorsas on October 7th, 1793.'‡

* In a letter to *The Times Literary Supplement* of May 1st, 1930.

† Knight, *Letters*, Vol. I, p. 57.

‡ Mr. A. W. Craver, in a letter to the same journal, published on May 29th, 1930, has thrown doubt upon Professor Harper's inter-

It seems likely, therefore, that Wordsworth faced all the dangers of war and of the Terror at this time in an attempt to see Annette again, to arrive at some understanding with her that would tide them over the war, which naturally they did not expect to be of long duration. At close quarters, however, those dangers proved to be too formidable, and Wordsworth had to beat a retreat without seeing Annette.

The war lasted for nearly nine years. Month after month, and then year after year, Wordsworth remained parted from the object of his affections. Animal passions, personal love, self-devotion – all had been engaged to their fullest degree: now they were to be slowly thwarted – not stultified by death: that would have been merciful; but slowly starved of their nourishment, which is the intimacy and intercourse of daily life, the mutual interchange of sympathy and physical presence. Only a friendship firmly based on a common history and intimacy of some duration, or a friendship based on active intellectual interests, can survive a lengthy separation. Wordsworth's love for Annette had no such foundation: it was passionate, but had been hasty and intermittent; and Annette, though no doubt quick and sensitive, was in Professor Legouis's phrase 'devoid of

pretation of Wordsworth's letter. For a fuller discussion by Professor Harper of the evidence for Wordsworth's visit to France in 1793, see the *Quarterly Review*, April, 1927, pp. 254–264.

intellectual curiosity.' Wordsworth could only appeal to the memory of a few short hours of troubled ecstasy, to certain impressions received by the senses. Nothing is so impermanent, nothing so fleeting. The lovers drifted apart.

Wordsworth, however, carried with him a heavy burden of remorse. The whole period between this forced separation from Annette in 1793 and the willing confirmation of that separation by both parties nine years later, is one of deep mental stress for Wordsworth. It was a state of moral confusion that in its acute stages resulted in very little good poetry. What can we say of *Guilt and Sorrow*, of *The Borderers*,* and of *Margaret*, but that they are projections of this confused state of mind – efforts, unconscious perhaps, to cast off the burden, to resolve the crisis in the objectivity of a work of art? But a work of art never proceeds from a confused mind, from a morbid complex; it requires as the first condition of its creation, *peace* of mind, complete serenity. Wordsworth was striving for that state of tranquillity, and by the end of 1798 he had acquired it. But in the process of the struggle certain mental or intellectual compensations had

* '. . . a tragedy to which perhaps somewhat less than justice has been done on the score of literary power, but which, in the moral conception and development of its leading idea, is, I suppose, unparalleled by any serious production of the human intellect for morbid and monstrous extravagance of horrible impossibility.' Swinburne, *Miscellanies*, pp. 117–8 (1886).

become necessary. You cannot, as a rule, solve an emotional crisis, without creating an intellectual reaction. What is the intellect, indeed, but a device for maintaining an emotional equilibrium?

The first phase of Wordsworth's mental evolution at this time was the consolidation of the humanitarian sympathies he had acquired in France. He was not only separated from Annette, but also from Beaupuis, and Beaupuis had communicated to him an enthusiasm which burned all the brighter, away from the distracting presence of Annette. Indeed, at first it was an anodyne – an intellectual drug which he took to deaden the misery of his heart. His actual movements at this time continue to be for the most part untraceable. We know that he remained in Wales with his friend Jones until October, 1793. We next hear of him on February 17th, 1794, when he writes to another great college friend, William Mathews, from an address near Halifax, and in this letter he says 'I quitted Keswick some time since, and have been moving backwards and forwards.' At Keswick he had probably been visiting his friend William Calvert, and at Halifax he was staying under the same roof as his sister Dorothy – a reunion which they had long planned, but for which they had had to wait three years. How long he stayed near Halifax is not known,

but he tells Mathews that he has done nothing towards a means of livelihood and still continues to do nothing. 'What is to become of me,' he writes, 'I know not. I cannot bow down my mind to take orders; and as for the law, I have neither strength of mind, purse, or constitution, to engage in that pursuit.' He will resume his Italian studies and instruct his sister in that language.

We next find brother and sister staying in a farmhouse near Keswick, the guests of William Calvert, living like gipsies. 'We please ourselves in calculating from our present expenses for how very small a sum we could live. We find our own food. Our breakfast and supper are of milk, and our dinner chiefly of potatoes, and we drink no tea.' Dorothy scandalises the neighbourhood by her unconventional habit of 'rambling about the country on foot.' Young ladies in those days had no visible means of locomotion; they must for ever sit in a post-chaise. Her aunt, Mrs. Crackanthorp, recalls Dorothy to reason. But she has been infected with the spirit of rebellion, and replies:

'I affirm that I consider the character and virtues of my brother as sufficient protection; and besides I am convinced that there is no place in the world in which a good and virtuous young woman would be more likely to continue good

and virtuous than under the roof of these honest, worthy, uncorrupted people: so that any guardianship beyond theirs I should think altogether unnecessary.' Unperturbed, they pursued their Italian studies.

Meanwhile Wordsworth's political sympathies become more definite, more urgent. He wants to take action, to shout his ideals from the housetops. This poet of Nature, this nursling of the mountains and the rills, has become so absorbed in the wrongs of society that he grows tired of his farmhouse retreat. On November 7th he writes to his friend Mathews: 'I begin to wish much to be in town. Cataracts and mountains are good occasional society, but they will not do for constant companions.' That is a momentous confession! We can have no better measure of the extraordinary state of his mind at this period, amounting almost to a dissociation of personality, than to put that statement: 'Cataracts and mountains are good occasional society, but they will not do for constant companions' – against the characteristic utterances of his great poems, particularly the *Prelude*. It is a denial of the central doctrine of the *Prelude*, and one of those minute fissures of reality that make us doubt the autobiographical validity of that idealistic structure.

The plan which Wordsworth outlined in a

series of letters written from the North to his friend Mathews in London, was one to which many young poets have turned, especially those of revolutionary inclinations. He proposed to start a magazine; or rather he proposes that Mathews should start a magazine, to which he would contribute in bulk. It is to be called *The Philanthropist*, a *Monthly Miscellany* – a title, he said, which would be noticed, because it includes everything that can instruct and amuse mankind. These letters to Mathews contain what is perhaps the most extreme statement of Wordsworth's republican convictions:

'I solemnly affirm,' he writes, 'that in no writings of mine will I ever admit of any sentiment which can have the least tendency to induce my readers to suppose that the doctrines which are now enforced by banishment, imprisonment, etc., etc., are other than pregnant with every species of misery. You know perhaps already that I am of that odious class of men called democrats, and of that class I shall ever continue.'

And again in another letter:

'I disapprove of monarchical and aristocratical governments, however modified. Hereditary distinctions, and privileged orders of every species, I think must necessarily counteract the progress of human improvement: hence it follows that I am

not amongst the admirers of the British Constitution.'

This journalistic project, like many others of of its kind, did not survive the fever in which it had its origin. 'The more nearly we approached the time fixed for action, the more strongly was I persuaded that we should decline the field,' writes Wordsworth to Mathews in November. He then enquires about the possibility of finding newspaper work in London, and must have been on the point of throwing himself into the turmoil of Grub Street, when he was saved from this fate by the action of William Calvert and his brother Raisley. Raisley was suffering from consumption, and Wordsworth was engaged as something in the nature of a companion to the sick man. Wordsworth proposed a voyage to Lisbon for the benefit of Raisley, but nothing came of it. Calvert was probably too ill, for he died early in 1795, leaving Wordsworth a legacy of £900.

Now, it might be thought, Dorothy and Wordsworth could realise their great desire, and live together in comfort and independence. How much they had longed for that retreat and pictured it in every detail, may be gathered from Dorothy's letters to her friend Jane Pollard. But at this very juncture Wordsworth once more disappears. 'From January to September, 1795,

Wordsworth,' says Professor Harper, 'is as completely lost to sight as if he had been locked up in Newgate or had returned to France. There is a gap of sixteen months in the published letters of his sister, and of nearly eleven months in his own.' There is nothing to explain this gap in the story. He does not seem to have written any poetry during the period; *Guilt and Sorrow* was finished in 1794, and *The Borderers* not begun till late in 1795. We can only guess that most of the time was spent in London, in the Godwin circle, and that Wordsworth vainly tried to drown his remorse and despondency in political activity, varied, perhaps, by intervals of solitary wandering. But we simply do not know. It was during these months, perhaps, that he absorbed so fully the doctrines of Godwin, Paine, Rousseau and other political theorists of the age. It is not part of my purpose to estimate the extent of Wordsworth's indebtedness to these writers; it has already been done by others, notably by Professor Beatty, and in any case, with the possible exception of Rousseau, none of these writers left a permanent impression on Wordsworth's poetry. Within five years he had rejected the intellect and all its works, and fallen back on his original faith in feeling and intuition and the all-sufficiency of a direct contact with Nature. Wordsworth's mind, I would like to repeat, rejected the

didactic teachings of books; he was influenced during the course of his life entirely through the medium of personality. Such influences were about to break upon him in their greatest and most far-reaching effect, for finally, in October of that year, 1795, the necessary arrangements were made, and Wordsworth and his sister settled at Racedown in Dorsetshire. It was a fateful step, for at Racedown Wordsworth entered into fullest communion with his sister and at Racedown Wordsworth met Coleridge. A new life began.

The relation between Wordsworth and his sister, which I must now describe, was not a normal one. Dorothy was a year or so younger, and since their mother's death when she was barely seven, she had not seen much of her brothers. It was only in 1789, during his second summer vacation from Cambridge, that Wordsworth first spent any length of time with Dorothy. 'She seemed a gift then first bestowed.' They were nineteen and eighteen years old respectively; Dorothy was an eager, imaginative girl, blessed with vigorous animal spirits and an acute sensibility. When De Quincey met her, nearly twenty years later, he received, and passed on to us, an unforgettable impression:

'"Her face was of Egyptian brown"; rarely in

a woman of English birth, had I seen a more determinate gipsy tan. Her eyes were not soft . . . nor were they fierce or bold; but they were wild and startling, and hurried in their motion. Her manner was warm and even ardent; her sensibility seemed constitutionally deep; and some subtle fire of impassioned intellect apparently burned within her, which, being alternately pushed forward into a conspicuous expression by the irrepressible instincts of her temperament, and then immediately checked, in obedience to the decorum of her sex and age, and her maidenly condition, gave to her whole demeanour, and to her conversation, an air of embarrassment, and even of self-conflict, that was almost distressing to witness. Even her very utterance and enunciation often suffered, in point of clearness and steadiness, from the agitation of her excessive organic sensibility.'*

A modern psychologist would probably find a harsh enough word to describe her temperament. She was, of course, neurotic, and finding no outlet for her excessive sensibility, the repression became too much for her and she finally went insane. But from 1794 until her mind broke down in 1828, Dorothy was Wordsworth's most constant companion, nearer and dearer to him, we can safely say, than his own wife. Her

* *Reminiscences of the Lake Poets*, ' William Wordsworth.'

Journals, written at various intervals between 1798 and the year of her eclipse, are at once an intimate revelation of her life with her brother, and the evidence of a considerable gift for literary expression. It is well known that Wordsworth drew some of his most effective images from this source; Dorothy was, in a very real sense, a collaborator with him in his work. They were matched in their passionate nature, in the acuteness of their sensibility, in the general character of their desires and ideals. No other link was ever so strong in Wordsworth's life as this that bound him to his sister, and though Dorothy may have had a more than common affection for Coleridge, it was never such as to disturb her perfect attachment to her brother. When he leaves her to go on a walking-tour with his brother, this is how she records her feelings: 'I had been very melancholy in my walk back. I had many of my saddest thoughts, and I could not keep my tears within me.' On another occasion, when she is expecting him back from an absence, she writes: 'I went up into the lane to collect a few green mosses to make the chimney gay against my darling's return.'

I do not suggest that there was anything sinister in Dorothy's affection for her brother: the abnormality lay in her neurotic sensibility, and in the absence of any normal outlet for her

feelings. This intensified her affection for her brother, wrought it into possessive and protective instincts not often found in the relationship. There was apparently no jealousy in her attitude towards Annette, nor afterwards towards Mary Hutchinson. In Mary's case she perhaps regretted having to yield up a part of her empire; but her love for Mary caused her to suppress any feelings of resentment that she might have.

It does not seem that Dorothy exercised any dominance of will over her brother. Wordsworth was, indeed, much the stronger willed of the two. She was therefore ready to accept and defend all the mutations of that master will. She accepted republicanism, she accepted deism, she accepted Annette. In fact, as time went on, and Wordsworth's love for the absent French girl grew colder, Dorothy stepped into his place and maintained the correspondence. Annette was always 'poor Annette' for her, and she lavished on the unfortunate mother a romantic sympathy that deepened as she herself lapsed into a hopeless spinsterhood.

The part played by Dorothy at the time of Wordsworth's moral crisis was a simple one. By giving him her love and sympathy and daily care and presence, she destroyed that terrible physical blankness that descends on us when we are suddenly parted from someone we have loved

habitually. She filled this blank, and not mutely or passively, but as an active consoling and inspiring agent. But Wordsworth himself has paid his tribute to her ascendency at this time:

> Ah! Then it was
> That Thou, most precious Friend! about this time
> First known to me, didst lend a living help
> To regulate my Soul, and then it was
> That the belovèd Woman in whose sight
> Those days were pass'd, now speaking in a voice
> Of sudden admonition, like a brook
> That did but cross a lonely road, and now
> Seen, heard and felt, and caught at every turn,
> Companion never lost through many a league
> Maintained for me a saving intercourse
> With my true self; for, though impair'd and chang'd
> Much, as it seemed, I was no further chang'd
> Than as a clouded, not a waning moon:
> She in the midst of all, preserv'd me still
> A Poet, made me seek beneath that name
> My office upon earth . . .
>
> x, 905-921 (1805).

This process of redemption went on in the peaceful seclusion of the house they had secured at Racedown. The Wordsworths settled there in September, 1795. When Wordsworth first met Coleridge is not known, but it was probably during his stay in Bristol, previous to moving into the house at Racedown. We know for certain that the two were intimate enough to show each other their verses by the end of November.* For some time Coleridge had been busy in Bristol: it was the headquarters of the famous Pantisocratic Scheme which he and Southey elaborated. Twelve young men 'of good education and liberal principles' accompanied by twelve young ladies were to emigrate to the backwoods of America and found a new colony, which was to be a new heaven on earth. Life was to be supported by two or three hours labour each day, a good library of books was to be collected, and their leisure hours to be spent in study, liberal discussions, and the education of their children. But by the time Wordsworth appeared on the scene, the Scheme had fallen through, though Coleridge and Southey were still hopeful that something might be done. But then they quarrelled and both began to find their literary interests sufficient to absorb their youthful energies.

The year 1796 passed quietly for the Words-

* Letter to Wrangham of November 20th.

worths. They had taken a ward to educate, the only child of Basil Montagu, but they did not take their duties any more seriously than a pair of Rousseauites should. They went for a walk when the weather was fine, they read novels and books of travel, they sometimes went hunting or coursing. They occasionally had friends to stay with them. Wordsworth worked away at his tragedy, *The Borderers*, and at a satire in the manner of Juvenal which has never been published in its entirety.* Among the visitors to Racedown was Mary Hutchinson, but Wordsworth seems to have seized the opportunity to leave Dorothy in order to go to Bristol. He no doubt saw a good deal of Coleridge then, but in June, 1797, their friendship was sealed by a visit of Coleridge to Racedown. A letter of Coleridge's to his friend and publisher Cottle has survived, and is of great interest, not only in showing the degree of intimacy which the two young poets had already reached, but also in revealing the attitude of subordination and almost reverence which Coleridge immediately adopted:

'My dear Cottle, I am sojourning for a few days at Racedown, the mansion of our friend Wordsworth, who has received Fox's *Achmed*. He

* Fragments of it were published by Professor Knight in *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, I. 88 and 94.

returns you his acknowledgements, and presents his kindliest respects to you. I shall be home by Friday – not to-morrow – but the next Friday . . . Wordsworth admires my tragedy, which gives me great hopes. Wordsworth has written a tragedy himself. I speak with heartfelt sincerity, and (I think) unblinded judgment, when I tell you that I feel myself *a little man by his side*, and yet do not think myself the less man than I formerly thought myself. His drama is absolutely wonderful. You know I do not commonly speak in such abrupt and unmingled phrases, and therefore will the more readily believe me. There are in the piece those *profound* touches of the human heart which I find three or four times in *The Robbers* of Schiller and often in Shakespeare, but in Wordsworth there are no *irregularities*. T. Poole's opinion of Wordsworth is that he is the greatest man he ever knew; I coincide.

'It is not impossible, that in the course of two or three months I may see you. God bless you, and

S. T. Coleridge.'

Wordsworth would hardly have expressed the same enthusiasm for the tragedy that Coleridge was then engaged on – *Osorio*. In fact, all through the relationship that was now established between them, Wordsworth complacently accepted all that Coleridge had to give; and this was much.

In the first place, it was a tremendous faith in the genius of Wordsworth, and such a faith, at a critical stage in a poet's life, can mean everything. Coleridge cried up his genius on all sides, calling him 'the best poet of the age,' 'the Giant Wordsworth,' the 'new Milton,' and so forth. In the second place, he acted as a perfect sounding-board for Wordsworth's nascent intellectual powers. It is a mistake to think that Coleridge awakened Wordsworth from some kind of dogmatic slumber, particularly in the matter of poetic diction. Wordsworth had written *The Ruined Cottage* before he met Coleridge, and this poem is so great an advance on this earlier work, especially in the direction of simplicity and realism, that it really contains the germ of all his subsequent development. Coleridge's function, in this momentous relationship, was to act as a rationalising agent. Wordsworth's thought, in so far as it may be described as in any way original, was intuitive by nature. Coleridge took these intuitions, translated them into discursive terms, sought out their metaphysical analogues, combined imagination and logic, and talked, talked, talked. They were so charmed with each other's society, that they decided they must live near to one another. A month after Coleridge's visit, the Wordsworths had found a house at Alfoxden, two miles from Nether Stowey, where

Coleridge was living. From that time, and for many a day to come, their intercourse was constant.

Meanwhile, what of Annette? Correspondence between France and England was uncertain; many letters were lost. In Wordsworth's life other interests were growing apace – the personal influence of Dorothy, the intellectual interest of Coleridge, and, most absorbing of all, the creative interest of poetry. Annette and the passionate experience that centred in her, became a shadowy memory. Even remorse lost its viperous stings. There is a saying of Richepin's to the effect that the love of art involves the loss of real love.* Wordsworth's change of nature during these years illustrates its profound truth. As the love for Annette grew less, another change took place. We never suddenly lose an emotional attachment; we slowly bury it under rational camouflage. And so from now onwards we find Wordsworth losing faith in France, losing faith in those humanitarian ideals for which France was a symbol. Why? Because he was transferring to this symbol France the effects of his cooling affection for Annette. He could not avow to himself his loss of love for Annette; but he could give his uneasy conscience scope in the idea of the country and nation to which she belonged. Wordsworth was recovering

* *L'amour de l'art fait perdre l'amour vrai.*

his stability, finding his ideal self or personality, his philosophy of nature and his poetic genius; he was losing Annette, his faith in youth and change, his fundamental honesty.

CHAPTER IV

THE FLASHING OF A SHIELD

. . . even then I felt
Gleams like the flashing of a shield. . . .
Prelude I, 585–6.

CHAPTER IV

THE FLASHING OF A SHIELD

'During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbours,' writes Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria* (Chap. XIV), 'our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of the imagination. . . . The thought suggested itself – to which of us I do not recollect – that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. . . . For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such as will be found in every village and its vicinity, where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them,

or to notice them, when they present themselves.' In this idea, Coleridge goes on to say, originated the plan of the *Lyrical Ballads*, and his own endeavours were to be directed to the first, or supernatural, sort of poetry. 'Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.'

These conversations at Alfoxden were most momentous in their results. It is no exaggeration to say that we to-day, more than 130 years afterwards, are still writing poetry in the tradition then established. As first expressed this theory of poetic diction was extremely faulty and inadequate; it was criticised and amended by Wordsworth and Coleridge themselves as time went on, and twenty years after its first formulation, Coleridge had entirely dissociated himself from its tenets. But actually in its origin the theory owed most to Wordsworth: as I pointed out in the last chapter, the main principles of poetic diction laid down in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*,

are already embodied in *Guilt and Sorrow*, of which thirty stanzas were printed in *Lyrical Ballads*, under the title of *The Female Vagrant*, and in *The Ruined Cottage*, another poem already in existence before Coleridge had any effective communication with Wordsworth. Of the former poem Coleridge was afterwards to write, in *Biographia Literaria*, (Chap. IV): 'I was in my twenty-fourth year, when I had the happiness of knowing Mr. Wordsworth personally, and while memory lasts, I shall hardly forget the sudden effect produced in my mind, by his recitation of a manuscript poem. . . . There was here no mark of strained thought, no forced diction, no crowd or turbulence of imagery. It was not however the freedom from false taste, whether as to common defects, or to those more properly his own, which made so unusual an impression on my feelings immediately, and subsequently on my judgment. It was the union of deep feeling with profound thought; the fine balance of truth in observing, with the imaginative faculty in modifying, the objects observed; and above all the original gift of spreading the tone, the atmosphere, and with it the depth and the height of the ideal world around forms, incidents, and situations, of which, for the common view, custom had bedimmed all the lustre, had dried up the sparkle and the dewdrops.' When *The Ruined Cottage* was read to

him at Alfoxden in June, 1797, Coleridge was in ecstasies; it was a revelation of endless force, a thrilling inspiration; and eighteen years later he was still calling it 'the finest poem in our language, comparing it with any of the same or similar length.'*

This poem was later incorporated with the Book I of the *Excursion*, and was not published until 1814. We do not know how far it was modified in the intervening years, and it is therefore impossible to base any general observations valid for the year 1797, on the text of 1814. But the *Female Vagrant*, begun in 1793 and finished before Wordsworth's meeting with Coleridge, is sufficient evidence of the elder poet's priority in the revolt against poetic diction that was to be jointly declared by the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*. Here is a stanza from that poem which exemplifies all the qualities that subsequently were claimed for the maturer work of the later poems in *Lyrical Ballads:*

> There was a youth whom I had loved so long,
> That when I loved him not I cannot say.
> Mid the green mountains many and many a song
> We two had sung, like little birds in May.
> When we began to tire of childish play

* Letter to Lady Beaumont, April 3rd, 1815.

We seemed still more and more to prize each other:
We talked of marriage and our marriage day;
And I in truth did love him like a brother,
For never could I hope to meet with such another.

It is simple to the verge of triteness, but it illustrated this fact which is so often forgotten: that Wordsworth was purged of 'the gaudiness and inane phraseology' of the prevailing tradition of poetic diction some time before he had effective contact with Coleridge's mind, and that whatever Coleridge may have contributed to the development of Wordsworth's genius, it did not concern what I personally regard as by far the most important aspect of that genius – his return to the realities of poetic composition.

I think that if we had not had the clear evidence of this priority in Coleridge's confession, we could have inferred it from a comparison of the respective poems contibuted by the two poets to the first volume of the *Lyrical Ballads*. Apart from the *Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge is represented by three poems of very indifferent merit. There is no real vitality in either *The Foster-Mother's Tale*, *The Nightingale* or *The Dungeon;* there is the influence of Wordsworth, but not the inspiration. The *Ancient Mariner* is a different story; but the

Ancient Mariner is a very strange book-fellow for the rest of the volume. It is the supernatural as opposed to the natural, and its very greatness depends on a defiance of the cardinal principles which Wordsworth was to lay down in his Preface to the second edition of the *Ballads*. Here are no incidents selected from common life – everything is most uncommon; no conversational language of the lower and middle classes of society, but the archaic vocabulary of Percy's *Reliques*. It was a sedulous search for what we would now call the Grand Guignol thrill, pursued with every artifice or horror and exaggeration:

His bones were black with many a crack,
All black and bare, I ween:
Jet-black and bare, save where with rust
Of mouldy damps and charnel crust
They're patch'd with purple and green.

Her lips are red, *her* looks are free,
Her locks are yellow as gold:
Her skin is as white as leprosy,
And she is far liker Death than he;
Her flesh makes the still air cold.

The naked Hulk alongside came
And the Twain were playing dice;
'The game is done! I've won, I've won!'
Quoth she, and whistled thrice.

A gust of wind sterte up behind
And whistled thro' his bones;
Thro' the holes of his eyes and the hole of his mouth
Half-whistles and half-groans.'

It is magnificent, but it is not Wordsworth!

Wordsworth desired quite a different effect. What his aims were, he himself has declared in the Preface he wrote for the 1800 edition of the *Ballads*, and later amplified for the 1802 edition. I know of no clearer evidence of Wordsworth's genius than this declaration of poetic faith. It is the most eloquent as well as the most reasoned statement of the aims and ideals of a poet that we have in our language. It is full, too, of careful psychological observation and profound self-analysis. It may not bear close examination on every point of detail; some of its arguments are manifestly prejudiced. But the objections that have been made to its various propositions are too often based on careless reading or incomplete quotation.

The Prefaces, when analysed, resolve into certain declarations as to the object of poetry, others concerning the methods by which these objects are to be attained, and certain corollaries dependent on these axioms. The main object, as laid down in the 1800 Preface, is 'to make the

incidents of common life interesting.' In the 1802 Preface this rather ingenuous ambition was amplified and the object became 'to chuse incidents and situations from common life and to relate and describe them, throughout, *as far as possible*, in a selection of language really used by men.'

I think it will be clear, that this object, and particularly the way in which it is expressed, betrays Wordsworth's social conscience. It is practically certain, and it is an important fact in its bearings on the general psychology of genius, that a political upheaval preceded the poetical upheaval in Wordsworth's mind. It was his dissatisfaction with the prevailing order of society and the concentration of his aspirations and hopes on another order, that led him to question the prevailing forms of poetry and cast about for a form bearing some sympathetic relation to his political ideals. Those political ideals were an affirmation of the rights of the common people – not only of their rights, but of their representative humanity; his poetry, therefore, should rise out of this common life and be its faithful reflection.

The second object of poetry, was to have a purpose. Narrative or description alone is not sufficient; interest is not an end in itself. The poem must achieve something positive. But when

Wordsworth comes to define the purpose of poetry, it is not ethical, as we might expect, but rather psychological. It is 'to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement . . . speaking in less general language, it is to follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature.' And he adds this qualification: that the feeling developed in a poem gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling.

Wordsworth, as I think it is generally known, was perfectly familiar with the associationist psychology of his day, particularly in the form given to it by Hartley. The fifth chapter of *Biographia Literaria* is entitled 'On the law of Association. Its history traced from Aristotle to Hartley,' and there is really no end to the theme in the critical literature of the day. There are many traces of its jargon, not only in Wordsworth's Prefaces, but also in the *Prelude* and the shorter poems. Speaking of his early childish impressions in the first Book of the *Prelude*, he says:

> . . . even then I felt
> Gleams like the flashing of a shield; the earth
> And common face of Nature spake to me

Rememberable things; sometimes, 'tis true,
By chance collisions and quaint accidents . . .
. . . yet not vain
Nor profitless, if haply they impress'd
Collateral objects and appearances,
Albeit lifeless then, and doom'd to sleep
Until maturer seasons call'd them forth
To impregnate and to elevate the mind.
– And if the vulgar joy by its own weight
Wearied itself out of the memory,
The scenes which were a witness of that joy
Remained, in their substantial lineaments
Depicted on the brain, and to the eye
Were visible, a daily sight; and thus
By the impressive discipline of fear,
By pleasure and repeated happiness,
So frequently repeated, and by force
Of obscure feelings representative
Of joys that were forgotten, these same scenes,
So beauteous and majestic in themselves,
Though yet the day was distant, did at length
Become habitually dear, and all
Their hues and forms were by invisible links
Allied to the affections.

I, 613-40 (1805).

Professor Beatty has shown how the very phraseology of such passages is drawn from Hartley. And the idea of the relationship existing between

one's feelings and ideas, so fundamental to Wordsworth's theory of poetry, was drawn from Hartley too. According to Hartley's psychology, our passions or affections are no more than aggregates of simple ideas united by association; and simple ideas are ideas surviving sensations after the objects which caused them have been removed. First, sensations, 'which arise from the impressions made by external objects upon the several parts of our bodies'; then simple ideas of sensation; finally, under the power of association, all the various faculties of the human mind, such as memory, imagination, understanding, affection and will.

I do not wish to go any farther than is strictly necessary into this hinterland of Wordsworth's ideas. I think we have now sufficient terms of the Hartleian psychology. In such terms, then, according to Wordsworth the *purpose* of poetry is: to proceed from the simple ideas inherent in the incidents and situations of common life to the exhibition of that faculty of the human mind known as affection; more briefly, the purpose of poetry is to develop feeling out of the ideas surviving from the sensations of daily life. It was the state of feeling that mattered, and not the sequence of sensations; for all feelings are attended with some degree of pleasure or pain, and from the interaction of pleasure and pain

arises that whole hierarchy of human values which Wordsworth was henceforth to celebrate. 'I sing,' he declared in the Proem to *The Recluse* –

> Of Truth, of Grandeur, Beauty, Love, and Hope,
> And melancholy Fear subdued by Faith;
> Of blessèd consolations in distress;
> Of moral strength, and intellectual Power;
> Of joy in widest commonalty spread;
> Of the individual Mind that keeps her own
> Inviolate retirement . . .

Such are the values to be revealed by the poet: the methods by which he is to achieve this purpose are no less clearly defined in these Prefaces.

In the first place, as we have already noticed, the gaudiness and inane phraseology of eighteenth century poetic diction was to be rejected in favour of a *selection* of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation. Wordsworth insists on the principle of selection, and it is important to remember this, because much misunderstanding or misrepresentation of his practice has been current from a neglect of his exact wording. To his general intention, which was to adopt the very language of men for the purposes of poetic composition, he made two qualifications. That

very language was to be the heightened language of men in a state of vivid sensation – that is to say, language removed from every suggestion of triteness or triviality; and furthermore only a selection of that language was to be adopted. The immediate object of this rigorous selection was realistic: 'I wish,' he said, 'to keep my Reader in the company of flesh and blood.'

But true to his object, which was the primacy of human values, Wordsworth did not rest at the achievement of this degree of realism, but strove 'to throw over the incidents and situations from common life a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way' (1802). I do not think that at this time Wordsworth attached any particular significance to the word 'imagination' – not, at any rate, the tremendous significance that was later to be given to it by Coleridge. He merely meant that just as the language of men was to be selected for its vividness, so the incidents and situations were to be conceived in a vivid or dramatic aspect. But that again was not to involve any departure from reality; we must remember his famous assertion, which occurs in these Prefaces, that 'I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject.'

The real question here, is whether Wordsworth, by his qualifications, has cut away the

ground from under his original proposition. Coleridge pointed out the equivocation in the use of the word 'real'; for a 'selection of the *real* language of men' we should substitute 'a selection of the *ordinary* language of men.' But the ordinary language of men is not the language of any particular class, but the language common to all. And the nature of that language proceeding from men 'in a state of vivid sensation' will depend on the previous store of images and ideas, and the words to express them, existing in any particular individual's mind. 'For the property of passion,' Coleridge very acutely observes, 'is not to create; but to set in increased activity.'

Both Wordsworth's theory and Coleridge's criticism of it, assume a knowledge of that theory of association to which I have already referred. Remember that there are no such things as *innate* ideas in this psychology: Hartley was almost what we should call a Behaviourist, and Wordsworth accepted his theories as infallible. Thus when he speaks of 'Tracing in [the incidents of common life], truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement,' he is merely saying that Poetry must truly, though not ostentatiously, find a sound scientific basis for its operations in the tenets of associationist psychology. Low and

rustic life was to be preferred for the purpose of poetry because in that condition of life the essential passions and elementary feelings of men existed in what we should call a condition of freer association; they were not subject to so many repressions; they could thus be observed more accurately; moreover, such passions in rural conditions are associated with 'the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.' There is a chain of association between the phases of life and life's material environment, and the mind of man is evolved in the ever-increasing complexity of this chain. Without this inexhaustible source of objective beauty in the conditions of life, no beauty of language or of thought can develop. But out of such conditions, out of such repeated experience and regular feelings, will arise a language far more permanent and philosophical than that which is substituted for it by men who divorce themselves from the natural conditions of life – men who 'indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression in order to furnish food for fickle tastes and fickle habits of their own creation.'

Such was Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction, and as the theory of *a* poetic diction, I do not think that any subsequent criticisms, including that of Coleridge, have succeeded in refuting it. There are a score of Wordsworth's poems, and these among

his best (poems like *Lucy Gray*, *The Solitary Reaper*, and *Michael*) which triumphantly vindicate it. But it is equally true that there are as many poems which contradict the theory as an all-inclusive generalisation. The mistake is to imagine that any theory of poetry, which descends to accidentals of diction and metre, can be universal in its scope. When Wordsworth declares, as he does in these prefaces, that 'Poetry sheds no tears "such as Angels weep" but natural and human tears; she can boast of no celestial Ichor that distinguishes her vital juices from those of prose; the same blood circulates through the veins of them both' – it seems to me that here he is denying the very birthright of Poetry, and involving himself in that other statement which he makes on the same page, and which Coleridge so effectively refuted, 'that there neither is nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition.' Not that Coleridge left the position any clearer! I believe that it is not possible to give any exact statement of the problem, and therefore no solution, because the main term in the discussion is undefinable. Poetry *is* a divine Ichor, a distinct essence, and it differs from prose, not in mechanical structure, but in a quality derived from the presence, within the poet, of a different state of mind, determining a different approach to

life, to the universe, to language, to every accent of existence. What is a Poet? asks Wordsworth, and answers: 'He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is within him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually compelled to create them where he does not find them.' Exactly; and the rest of this famous definition is as exact and as well-observed. But is it possible to imagine that such a man, speaking to men, uses *at all times* the language and diction of common man? Is it possible to imagine that such a man speaks *at all times* in iambics, or any other metre? I would say rather, that such a man speaks in the language and the rhythm adequate to his theme, and no definitions can limit his variety.

It follows from what I have just said, that I must find Wordsworth's defence of metre illogical. It is not only inconsistent with any adequate conception of poetry, which Wordsworth possessed in full degree, but it is also inconsistent with

his own theory of poetic diction. Like Coleridge after him, his defence is based upon what I have come to regard as an obscure mystical argument, the argument of similitude in dissimilitude, the concept of the One in the Many.

Whereas in the matter of poetic diction, Wordsworth breaks with the orthodox convention of his day and returns to the natural diction of normal men, in the matter of metre he appeals to tradition. The concurring testimony of the ages, he says, has established the laws of metre, and all reasonable people submit to them and acknowledge them as a superadded charm. The state of excitement, which yields the right words and the right diction for poetry, is altogether too much of a good thing if allowed a free run in the matter of rhythm. 'There is some danger,' says Wordsworth, 'that the excitement may be carried beyond its proper bounds.' 'The co-presence of something regular, something to which the mind has been accustomed when in various moods and in a less excited state, cannot but have great efficacy in tempering and restraining the passion by an intermixture of ordinary feeling, and of feeling not strictly and necessarily connected with the passion.' That is a general argument for restraint, and no one could be more conscious of the necessity of restraint in all forms of art than I am. But there are two kinds of restraint: the restraint of the shackles, the strait-

laced jacket and the military goose-step, in short, restraint *outwardly* imposed; and the restraint of self-discipline, of a sense of proportion and order, a variant harmony – in short, restraint *inwardly* imposed. The first form of restraint is the giant of Pedantry, and though within these bonds a very impressive military parade may take place, the most vital poetry has managed to get at least one limb free; to break step when the passion mounted high, to throw the shackles of pedantry to the devil when the imagination was thoroughly roused. 'The metre of the old Ballads is very artless,' admits Wordsworth. People have said the same of Wordsworth's diction. But the artlessness of both is the secret of their art. Artlessness means the absence of artifice, the absence of an artificial diction and an artificial regularity of metre. That, I know, is involving Wordsworth in a contemporary quarrel, but as I said in the Introduction, one of the virtues of Wordsworth is that he is continually reminding us of our modernity.

As if to anticipate this plea for natural rhythm, or rather in a forced recognition of the inevitability of natural rhythm, Wordsworth finally indulges in that obscure mystical argument to which I have referred. He says: Among the chief of the causes upon which the pleasure received from metrical language depends, 'is

to be reckoned a principle which must be well known to those who have made any of the Arts the object of accurate reflection; I mean the pleasure which the mind derives from the perception of similitude in dissimilitude. This principle is the great spring of the activity of our minds, and their chief feeder. From this principle the direction of the sexual appetite, and all the passions connected with it, take their origin. It is the life of our ordinary conversation; and upon the accuracy with which similitude in dissimilitude, and dissimilitude in similitude, are perceived, depend our taste and our moral feelings.'

I suspect that Wordsworth is here repeating the phraseology of Hartley or someone else, possibly Coleridge. The argument may be that general laws are deduced from a multitude of phenomena, and that the perception of a general law is a moment of pleasure, of revelation. But I do not see how such a principle can direct our sexual appetite, be the life of our ordinary conversation, and the cause of the pleasure derived from metrical language. Does the statement amount to more than a paralogism? Wordsworth excuses himself from developing the theme, on the plea of limited space, and on the same plea I will leave the matter on a note of interrogation.

One further subject was touched on in Words-

worth's Prefaces: the actual psychology of inspiration. This aspect of his theories has been so badly misrepresented, that it will be worth while to examine his statements very closely. Wordsworth begins by saying that 'all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; *but*, he goes on to say, 'though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings.' We shall see, in the next chapter, more exactly what Wordsworth implied by the word 'thought' in this connection; here it is sufficient to emphasize the fact that in Wordsworth's view sensibility alone was not sufficient to ensure good poetry; it must be directed by a calm mind – which is, of course, the view of the classicist rather than the romanticist.

A few pages further on, Wordsworth elaborates this general statement by defining more closely the actual process of poetical inspiration. 'Poetry,' he says, 'takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.' That is the famous axiom so often misquoted, and made meaningless by divorce from its context. How often are we told

that 'Wordsworth defined poetry as emotion recollected in tranquillity?' He did nothing of the sort. He said that Poetry *takes its origin* from emotion recollected in tranquillity. He then went on to trace the course of poetry from this moment of origin. For, next, 'the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on.' The process, therefore, has four stages: recollection, contemplation, recrudescence, and composition. Wordsworth further observes that in the process of composition, the mind is upon the whole in a state of enjoyment, and will reflect this state in the accents of its utterance. For 'poetry is the image of man and nature' . . . 'It is an acknowledgment of the beauty of the universe, an acknowledgment the more sincere because it is not formal, but indirect; it is a task light and easy to him who looks at the world in a spirit of love: further, it is a homage paid to the native and masked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves. We have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure . . . wherever

we sympathize with pain it will be found that the sympathy is produced and carried on by subtle combinations with pleasure.'

To me it seems that all these propositions are self-evident, and none the less profound for being based on self-observation. There is perhaps a certain equivocation in the use of the word 'tranquillity,' but I do not think it is unduly stressed. All it implies, is that good poetry is never an immediate reaction to the provoking cause; that our sensations must be allowed time to sink back into the common fund of our experience, there to find their level and due proportion. That level is found for them by the mind, in the act of contemplation, and then in the process of contemplation the sensations revive, and out of the union of contemplating mind and the reviving sensibility, rises that unique mode of expression which we call poetry.

To pass from these Prefaces of 1800 and 1802, to the Preface to the Poems of 1815 and the Essay Supplementary thereto, is to pass from the realistic theories of a poet in full vitality, to the pedantic afterthoughts of a poet already jealous of his own past. The Preface is mainly devoted to a defence of that schematic division of his poems which he then adopted and which has done more than anything else to hinder a true appreciation

of his genius; and to a discussion of Imagination and Fancy, the twin humbugs of romantic criticism. The sooner that discussion is forgotten the better, and I shall do nothing here to prolong it. To make my meaning clear I will merely state, that both terms seem to me to be unnecessary; that invention is a more exact word, and may be distinguished as either logical or illogical according as to whether it proceeds from conscious or subconscious association. Psychology does not need any other terms, nor does criticism. The Essay Supplementary to the Preface of 1815 is interesting for its reflections on the history of English poetry, but otherwise is little more than a petulant defence of the poems from the unjust attacks of contemporary critics. I shall have occasion to refer to it later. For Wordsworth's effective contributions to the theory of poetry, we need not go further than the Preface of 1802, which indeed shows his mind in the vigour of its maturity.

That maturity has been reached over a period of intense mental activity, lasting four years. From the time of his settlement at Alfoxden in July, 1797, Wordsworth was in daily communication with the stimulating mind of Coleridge. He stayed there for about a year and then, after brief intervals in Bristol and London, Wordsworth with Dorothy and Coleridge went to Germany

and did not return until April, 1799. On their return Wordsworth and his sister stayed for eight months with the Hutchinsons on their farm at Sockburn, near Darlington, and I am inclined to think that during these months the moral crisis in Wordsworth's life was resolved. There is a letter from Coleridge to Poole, dated September 10th, 1799, in which he says: 'I have heard from W. Wordsworth. He is ill and seems not happy.'* At Sockburn, of course, he was in the company of Mary Hutchinson, his future wife. England and France were still at war, and away in France languished 'poor Annette,' as Dorothy now began to call her, and Wordsworth's daughter Caroline, now seven years old.

Mary Hutchinson had been at the same dame's school in Penrith with Wordsworth, and he had met her again in 1789, during his second summer vacation from Cambridge. Between Mary Hutchinson and Dorothy Wordsworth a firm friendship had always existed, and Mary had been one of the first of their friends to be invited to stay with them when they settled at Racedown in 1797. On that occasion, as I have already remarked, Wordsworth seems to have taken the opportunity of leaving Dorothy and visiting his friends in Bristol. Whether that is a sign that he was not yet in love with Mary, I will not venture to say.

* In the British Museum. Quoted by Harper, I. 36.

If he had been in love, a man of Wordsworth's moral scruples with his duty towards Annette ever present to his conscience, might still have felt impelled to keep away from the disturbing presence of Dorothy's friend. But was Wordsworth ever passionately in love with Mary? I feel forced to put the question in this schoolgirlish way, because I believe that the whole course of Wordsworth's conduct at this time was correspondingly naïve.

In that beautiful lyric on his wife, which he wrote some two years after their marriage, Mary Hutchinson is described at three separate stages of her history in his life. The first clearly relates to their joint childhood:

> She was a Phantom of delight
> When first she gleamed upon my sight;
> A lovely Apparition, sent
> To be a moment's ornament;
> Her eyes as stars of Twilight fair;
> Like Twilight's, too, her dusky hair;
> But all things else about her drawn
> From May-time and the cheerful Dawn;
> A dancing Shape, an Image gay,
> To haunt, to startle, and way-lay.

That is obviously a recollection of some fleeting impression; Wordsworth remembered his

schoolmate as in some momentary vision, as an apparition, not as a personality. The next stanza seems to refer to the time of his stay at Penrith in 1789:

> I saw her upon nearer view,
> A Spirit, yet a Woman too!
> Her household motions light and free,
> And steps of virgin-liberty;
> A countenance in which did meet
> Sweet records, promises as sweet;
> A Creature not too bright or good
> For human nature's daily food;
> For transient sorrows, simple wiles,
> Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears, and smiles.

The vision has come down to earth. A gentle household creature, going about her daily routine with cheerful readiness and virgin sweetness, a figure in a picture by Vermeer or Terborch.*

Then in the third stanza of his lyric, Wordsworth describes the Mary Hutchinson who had forgiven him his past, renounced all jealous

* In the Sixth Book of the *Prelude* there is another reference to Mary Hutchinson at this time. After referring to his sister, he writes:

> Another maid there was, who also breath'd
> A gladness o'er that season, then to me
> By her exulting outside look of youth
> And placid undercountenance, first endear'd. (1805).

What kind of love is it, I would ask, that can be recollected in such terms? Can a lover really speak of 'the placid undercountenance' of his sweetheart? Cf. also *Letters*, Vol. I, 141.

thoughts of Annette, and given herself to him in marriage:

> And now I see with eye serene
> The very pulse of the machine;
> A Being breathing thoughtful breath,
> A Traveller between life and death;
> The reason firm, the temperate will,
> Endurance, foresight, strength, and skill;
> A perfect Woman, nobly planned,
> To warm, to comfort, and command;
> And yet a Spirit still, and bright
> With something of angelic light.

I cannot help feeling that some quality is missing from this tribute. The image is beautiful, but it is *tame*. One element is not there, and that is not merely passion, but any trace of sensuous ecstasy. Thoughtful, temperate, enduring, comforting – these are Roman virtues, excellent in a matron, but irrelevant to the lover. Think again of those lines in *Vaudracour and Julia* inspired by his love for Annette:

> The house she dwelt in was a sainted shrine;
> Her chamber window did surpass in glory
> The portals of the dawn; all paradise
> Could, by the simple opening of a door,
> Let itself in upon him; pathways, walks,

Swarm'd with enchantment, till his spirit sank
Surcharged within him – overblest to move
Beneath a sun that wakes a weary world
To its dull round of ordinary cares;
A man too happy for mortality.

There speaks a lover, and a man never loves twice in exactly the same way. The full force of Wordsworth's adolescent emotions were expended upon Annette. And if there are some who would admit this, yet claim that such emotions are casual in their origin and that a greater love exists between man and woman which is spiritual, then I in my turn would claim that such spiritual love found expression not in Wordsworth's tribute to his wife, but in those mysterious but beautiful lyrics known as the *Lucy* poems – poems which give expression to some passion that is too strong to be merely visionary and too idealistic to be associated with mundane emotions,

It is difficult to trace all the convolutions of the tortuous development of Wordsworth's mind through the ten years that elapsed between his passion for Annette Vallon, and his marriage with Mary Hutchinson, but I have tried to indicate not only their general direction, but the presence of strong undercurrents. Above all, I want to emphasize the interdependence of emotional and intellectual development. We

grow to hate the object of a dead passion, but we do not acknowledge this to ourselves; we transfer that hatred to things associated with the dead passion. In this manner, Wordsworth gradually renounced the cause of France and then the cause of the Revolution, and finally the cause of humanity. That was one process of emotional compensation. Another existed in the poetic sublimation of his feelings. Art exhausts the fund of emotion – it crystallises emotion, breaks it off from the personality, leaves the mind calmer. The emotion of life finds its counterpart in the emotion of art.

Out of the emotional turmoil of Wordsworth's experiences in France came remorse and solitary anguish, the desire for an understanding of self and for an art adequate to deal with the shock of experience; then calm and the growth of healing thought; the extinction of passion; intellectual scars; domestic affections; a God regained. In that disciplined calm the poet could afford to look back, and out of his experience evolve a philosophy of Mind and Nature.

CHAPTER V

THE MAIN REGION

. . . The Mind of Man . . .
My haunt, and the main region of my song.
Preface to the *Excursion*.

CHAPTER V

THE MAIN REGION

In that period of emotional stress which followed his experiences in France, Wordsworth evolved not only a new attitude towards the purpose of his art, and the way in which that purpose was to be achieved, but also a general philosophy of life to which his art was subordinate. Actually each theory grew out of the same process of mental adjustment; the theory of art and the theory of life are different aspects of the same growing conviction. But the theory of art is a theory of means, of the objective instruments of thought, and is therefore simple compared with the theory of life, which is a philosophy embracing the Universe, and Man's place therein. Because it is so inclusive in its scope, so grandiose in its conception, so exalted in its expression, this theory of life has been subject to a good deal of misapprehension. It has been made to serve all kinds of purposes to which *piecemeal* it is liable. It must be taken as a coherent system, and judged as such. Even so, there is one method of approach

which leads to immediate distortion – I mean the approach of those, to whom I referred on an earlier page, more anxious to discover a new religion than a new poet. This, I think, has been the attitude typical of the second half of the nineteenth century – an attitude from which Arnold reacted almost too violently, going even so far as to make a severe separation between Wordsworth's poetry and his philosophy. 'We cannot do him justice,' Arnold remarks, 'until we dismiss his formal philosophy.' He then makes mild fun of Leslie Stephen's claim, that Wordsworth's 'ethical system is as distinctive and capable of exposition as Bishop Butler's'; and that his poetry is informed by ideas which 'fall spontaneously into a scientific system of thought.' By taking specimens of Wordsworth's later verse, this claim can be made to look absurd. So 'let us be on our guard,' cries Arnold, 'against the exhibitors and extollers of a "scientific system of thought" in Wordsworth's poetry. The poetry will never be seen aright while they thus exhibit it. The cause of its greatness is simple, and may be told quite simply. Wordsworth's poetry is great because of the extraordinary power with which Wordsworth feels the joy offered to us in nature, the joy offered to us in the simple primary affections and duties; and because of the extraordinary power with which, in case after case,

he shows us this joy, and renders it so as to make us share it.'

I do not think the matter is as simple as that. Wordsworth's poetry at its best is philosophical poetry, and belongs to that rare species of poetry in which *thought is felt.* We cannot therefore dismiss Wordsworth's formal philosophy in the careless manner suggested by Arnold, because we shall then be in danger of ignoring a special quality of his poetry. But Arnold's attitude was justified by the circumstances of his time. It was a time when one spoke naturally of 'devout' Wordsworthians; when the typical setting for a Wordsworth recital was 'a great room in one of our dismal provincial towns; dusty air and jaded afternoon daylight; benches full of men with bald heads and women in spectacles.' Perhaps Arnold was unduly scornful: those grey spectres of the machine age were terribly in need of a poet like Wordsworth, for they, too, had an ethical system of thought as distinctive and as capable of exposition as Bishop Butler's, but they had no joy; and because they could sympathise with the system of thought, they hoped that they might also share the joy. It was the hungry search of godless men for a substitute religion, and not only Arnold, but Wordsworth himself, took alarm at their oncoming multitudes.

It must be confessed that there was some solace

for these people in Wordsworth's poetry; not only in the later verse, which though conventionally pious is also moralistic in a common-sense and unemotional fashion, but also in his earlier verse, which in the period between 1792 and 1805, is decidedly pantheistic in sentiment. I have already stated my conviction, for which the evidence is not entirely suppressed, that for a time Wordsworth was a Deist, or, as we might fairly say, an atheist. That even his maturer poetry, in which his considered philosophy of nature was clearly expressed, still gave this impression – still betrayed this bias – is shown by the effect it had on Blake, as related by Henry Crabb Robinson in a letter to Dorothy Wordsworth (Feb., 1826).*

'After what I have said, Mr. W. will not be flattered by knowing that Blake deems him the *only poet* of the age, nor much alarmed by hearing that Blake thinks that he is often in his works an *Atheist.* Now, according to Blake, Atheism consists in worshipping the natural world, which same natural world, properly speaking, is nothing real, but a mere illusion produced by Satan. Milton was for a great part of his life an Atheist, and therefore has fatal errors in his *Paradise Lost*, which he has often begged Blake to confute. Dante (though now with God) lived and died an

* *Diary, etc., of H. C. Robinson*, ed. T. Sadler, 1869. Vol. II., 323–325.

Atheist; he was the slave of the world and time. But Dante and Wordsworth, in spite of their Atheism, were inspired by the Holy Ghost. Indeed, all real poetry is the work of the Holy Ghost, and Wordsworth's poems (a large proportion, at least) are the work of divine inspiration. Unhappily, he is left by God to his own illusions, and then the Atheism is apparent. I had the pleasure of reading to Blake, in my best style (and you know I am vain on that point, and think I read Wordsworth's poems peculiarly well), the "ode on Immortality." I never witnessed greater delight in any listener; and in general Blake loves the poems. What appears to have disturbed his mind, on the other hand, is the Preface to the *Excursion*. He told me, six months ago, that it caused him a stomach complaint, which nearly killed him. When I first saw Blake at Mrs. Aders', he very earnestly asked me, "Is Mr. Wordsworth a sincere, real Christian?" In reply to my answer, he said, "If so, what does he mean by the worlds to which the heaven of heavens is but a veil? and who is he that shall pass Jehovah unalarmed?"'

Blake was not alone in finding Wordsworth's conception of God rather nebulous. Within the confines of religion it would hardly be possible to find greater extremes than a mystic like Blake and – shall we say ?– a Unitarian; we are there-

fore lucky in having a record of the criticisms made by a Unitarian lady of the time after reading the *Excursion*. They are to be found in a copy kept by Crabb Robinson of a letter written by Wordsworth to Mrs. Clarkson.* Wordsworth was very angry with the unknown lady, and refused to write to her direct. 'I write to you and not to your friend with whom if you would take my advice,' he says to Mrs. Clarkson, 'you will never converse by letters nor *viva voce* upon a subject of which she is in every way disqualified to treat.' But what had the poor lady done to deserve this treatment? 'She talks,' says Wordsworth, 'of my being a worshipper of nature, a passionate expression uttered incautiously in the Poem upon the Wye has led her into this mistake. She, reading in cold heartedness and substituting the letter for the spirit – unless I am mistaken (there is nothing) of this kind in the *Excursion* . . . She condemns me for not distinguishing between Nature as the work of God, and God himself. But where does she find this doctrine inculcated? Whence does she gather that the author of the *Excursion* looks upon Nature and God as the same? He does not indeed consider the Supreme Being as bearing the same relation to the Universe as a Watch-maker bears to a watch. In fact there is

* Published by Edith J. Morley, *Correspondence of H. C. R., with the Wordsworth Circle.* I. pp. 78–82.

nothing in the course of religious education adopted in this country and in the use made by us of the Holy Scriptures that appears to me so injurious as the perpetually talking about *making* by God . . .' And so on. But the only help Wordsworth gives the Unitarian lady is an admonition to use her intelligence and be humble-minded. He does not tell her what his conception of the Supreme Being actually is. Therefore I cannot help feeling that there was something to be said for this presumptuous woman.

From a mystic like Blake to one of Arnold's dismal moralists is a far cry, but it shows the diverse extremes to which people may go in their interpretation of Wordsworth's philosophy. That philosophy is, indeed, a complex structure of mysticism and rationalism, but clear in its main outlines if we keep certain distinctions in mind. In the first place, we must fix a point of reference: Wordsworth did not find his philosophy ready-made; it developed with his experience and when in seclusion his experience grew remote, then, too, a change was involved, a retreat. The point of reference we should fix is certainly the *Prelude*, as completed in 1805. It is the culmination of his poetic activity and the fresh embodiment of his profoundest reflections on his own life. In the second place, we must fix the meaning of this ubiquitous word 'Nature.' Lastly, we must see

whether the apparent contradictions in Wordsworths' philosophy resolve into any logical explanation.

What, in general, did Wordsworth mean by the word 'nature'? The word has such diverse meanings, that our whole attitude towards Wordsworth's poetry can be vitiated if by chance we apply to it an inappropriate meaning. The question is very complicated, for no less is implied than the whole relation of man to the external world. There is, of course, a type of person who denies the possibility of such a relationship; the solipsist says that the ego and the external world are one and indivisible. With Schopenhauer let us dismiss such a person to the madhouse. We are then left with two extreme attitudes, which are best known as idealism and realism. In idealism the external world is imbued with man's own subjective sense of well-being and is found to be essentially good. The idealist therefore affirms the natural world and its instinctive life. Nature is the norm, a Worldly Paradise to which man must return to regain his lost happiness. The intellect is seen as a negative force, as an artificial restraint imposed upon a 'natural' state.

The realist, on the other hand, sees the world as an objective fact. Man is part of this world, but only a part, a phenomenon to be observed with the same impartiality as any other objects

within range. The feelings and sentiments of man have no divine right. The world must be examined dispassionately and the intellect is the only instrument with which we can measure it. Reason is the refined product of man's experience and research, and reason has enabled us to discover in the world certain natural laws to which we must subordinate our instincts. In so far, therefore, as the realist makes abstractions from the multitude of phenomena about him, it is to erect these so-called 'laws of nature.'

The subjective view of Nature is most completely represented by Rousseau; the objective view by that empirical school of philosophy beginning with Bacon and Locke and ending, so far as Wordsworth was concerned, with Hartley. Now though at first sight Wordsworth might seem to belong to the subjective school, and though many convincing quotations could be made to support the idea, actually by education and tradition and in the proper meaning of his poetry, he belongs to the empirical and objective school. Wordsworth is a true poet in Gautier's sense – a man for whom the visible world exists. But Gautier's phrase is not complete: a poet is a man for whom the visible world exists *in disjunction*, and the extraordinary complexity of Wordsworth's attitude towards Nature is due to this fact. The world was so visible and

real to him because he had had to build it up from brute sensation, element by element, till it was actual and objective. In that interesting note on the 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality' which Wordsworth dictated to Miss Fenwick, he says:

'It was [in childhood] not so much from the source of animal vivacity that *my* difficulty came as from a sense of the indomitableness of the spirit within me. I used to brood over the stories of Enoch and Elijah, and almost to persuade myself that, whatever might become of others, I should be translated in something of the same way to heaven. With a feeling congenial to this, I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality.' – *Grosart*, III, 194–5.

Now it is plain that this mental state of Wordsworth's boyhood was not an active sympathy with external things, but the state of solipsism which I have already described. Wordsworth was unable to distinguish between himself and the external world, and he felt that this was an abyss, a state of consciousness which almost withdrew him from life. He therefore struggled

against this mental tendency, and to do this he had to make the actual world as real as possible, to grasp at a tree or a wall and to feel its solidity. The mind must always be redressing its balance, if it is to preserve itself, and the natural compensation for an abyss of solipsism is a mountain of realism. And that is how, I think, Wordsworth came to create the actuality and vividness of his visible world. In the course of the psychological process he was drawn to seek rational props in the empirical philosophy of Locke and Hartley. This led him finally to an affirmation of Man's dignity, to a recognition of the Mind or Intellect as a principle co-ordinate with the life of Nature. Wordsworth's philosophy is therefore not restricted to a philosophy of nature: it is a theory of the Mind and its relations to the external world.

Wordsworth was not the kind of man who elaborates an intellectual conceit. His theories were grounded on his own sensations. The poet, he says in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, is a man 'pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate *similar* volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them.' I have stressed the word

'similar' because it is clear that Wordsworth here as elsewhere is not sharing his volitions and passions with the universe; he is contemplating distinct but similar passions and volitions. The individual Mind, as he declared in the fragment of the *Recluse*, is exquisitely fitted to the external World and no less exquisitely the external World is fitted to the Mind. But it is the marriage of distinct essences, and indeed the whole of Wordsworth's conception of Man and Nature can be conceived under such an analogy. The mind with him is always the creative masculine principle; Nature is always the feminine or reproductive principle. 'Oh! what a joy it were,' he cries,

> in vigorous health,
> To have a body (this our vital frame
> With shrinking sensibility endued,
> And all the nice regards of flesh and blood)
> And to the elements surrender it
> As if it were a spirit!'
>
> *Excursion*, IV, 508–13.

And again, in the *Recluse*, the image is the same:

> For the discerning intellect of Man,
> When wedded to this goodly universe
> In love and holy passion, shall find these

(Paradise, and groves Elysian, and Fortunate Fields)

A simple produce of the common day
– I, long before the blissful hour arrives,
Would chant, in lonely peace, the spousal
verse
Of this great consummation . . .'

There is no need to stress this epithalamial imagery, though actually, referring back to my definition of poetry, if you were to ask me: how can thought be felt? I should reply: not in pure ecstatic contemplation of its own processes, but by being conceived in some analogy which blends it vicariously with the passions and volitions of our vital frame.

This distinction drawn between the life of Nature and the life of Man is perhaps the most important point to remember in considering Wordsworth's poetry. It is the turn of his thought which distinguishes him most sharply from other poets of nature, both before and after his time, and it is to this carefully kept distinction that we owe the absence of sentimentality in his attitude towards Nature. The romantic poet projects into Nature his own feelings and sentiments. The poet's joy or melancholy is transferred to natural objects, or rather, a selection is made of

natural objects in which a sympathetic analogy can be traced, and these objects are endowed with the appropriate mood. It is the 'pathetic' fallacy, described by Ruskin. For Wordsworth, however, Nature had her own life, which was independent of ours, though a part of the same Godhead. Man and Nature, Mind and the external world, are geared together and in unison complete the motive principle of the universe. They act and react upon each other, 'so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure.' The exquisite functioning of this interlocked universe of Mind and Nature is for Wordsworth the highest theme of poetry; in poetry the process actually receives its final consummation.

But first the Mind must be realised in the individual, and Wordsworth has a great deal to say on this subject. Professor Beatty, in his book on Wordsworth's doctrine and art in their historical relations, has shown very clearly how fundamental this problem is with Wordsworth, and how deeply he had studied its treatment in the philosophy of his time. The sub-title of the *Prelude*, let us remember, is the 'Growth of a Poet's Mind,' and it is always as the history of his mental development that he conceived this poem. For his theoretical structure, as Professor Beatty has shown, Wordsworth went to Hartley. We have already seen that Hartley, following in

this matter theories suggested by Locke, Berkeley and Hume, divided the development of the mind into three stages, corresponding to the processes of association. Just as, in knowledge, you have first impressions of sensations, then simple ideas derived from these impressions, and finally complex ideas formed by the association of simple ideas, so, in the evolution of the mind you have first the age of sensation, or childhood; then the age of simple ideas, or Youth, and finally the age of complex ideas, or Maturity. In the *Prelude*, and in fact everywhere in his poetry, Wordsworth adheres closely to this scheme, and indeed the *Prelude* is nothing but an interpretation of this scheme in terms of his own experience. But the theory was already fully absorbed by 1798, for there are distinct traces of it in the *Tintern Abbey* poem, where the characteristics of each stage of development are given – the 'glad animal movements' of childhood, the 'passions' and 'appetites' of youth, and lastly 'that serene and blessed mood' when 'we are laid asleep in body, and become a living soul.'

A further point to note in this theory is that just as simple ideas come from impressions of sensation, and complex ideas from simple ideas, so the three ages of man are casually related to one another. The unconscious animal movements are transformed into conscious enjoyments, and

these in their turn impel the conscious mind towards a higher state of consciousness in which the creative principle, or the imagination, becomes active.

In all three stages the mind as well as the body is wisely passive:

> The eye it cannot chuse but see,
> We cannot bid the ear be still;
> Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
> Against, or with, our will.
>
> Nor less I deem that there are powers,
> Which of themselves our minds impress,
> That we can feed this mind of ours
> In a wise passiveness.

Professor Beatty would argue that there is nothing 'mystical' in this statement; that it contains no more than the prose statement of Locke: 'The mind is wholly passive in the reception of all its simple ideas.' But the 'powers which of themselves' impress our minds are not to be neglected in Wordsworth's poem, and when he continues:

> Come forth into the light of things,
> Let Nature be your teacher

he has in mind a Nature definitely operating upon your sensibility, moulding it, making the mind *fit* the external world. This poem should be read in conjunction with those lines from the *Prelude* which I quoted in Chapter I:

> Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows
> Like harmony in music; there is a dark
> Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles
> Discordant elements, makes them cling
> together
> In one society.

That is from the 1850 version; in the 'V' MS, the earliest extant draft of any considerable part of the *Prelude*, dated 1799–1800 by Professor de Sélincourt, the statement of active intervention is much more explicit:

> The mind of man is fashioned and built up
> Even as a strain of music: I believe
> That there are Spirits which, when they
> would form
> A favored being, from his very dawn
> Of infancy do open out the clouds
> As at the touch of lightning, seeking him
> With gentle visitations, quiet Powers!

But these intervening powers are a somewhat fanciful elaboration of his main theory. 'Impel-

ling forces' Wordsworth was always ready to recognise in the universe, but the individual lives 'by admiration and by love.' The springs of his activity are part of his make-up, of his endowment.

Among the interesting manuscripts published for the first time by Professor de Sélincourt is a note-book of 102 pages ('Y' in the series). 'It is in very bad condition,' says Professor de Sélincourt, 'for it had evidently been left out in the rain and then dried before a hot fire.' Consequently a good deal of it is obliterated. But there is a long passage of 240 lines which has not suffered very much. It is the first draft of a passage evidently intended as an alternative for some dozen lines in Book VIII of the *Prelude*, but never worked up or used, presumably because Wordsworth felt that they duplicated too much other passages in the *Prelude*. But they contain a very clear statement of Wordsworth's doctrine of the relation of Man to Nature, traced in the three stages of individual development. He first describes the Child in the process of discovering the simple and then the finer things of Nature's workmanship, 'Her scattered accidents of sight and sound.' At the beginning the Child accepts these gifts unreflectingly: he grows like any other animal,

he irradiates all without,
Vulgar impostor seems and unrefin'd,
Careless of Nature's presence, and unaw'd . . .
And his own person, senses, faculties
Centre and soul of all.

Then slowly the child's mind begins to experience wonder, and even fear:

Then everyday appearances, which now
The spirit of thoughtful wonder first pervades,
Crowd in and give the mind its needful food;
Nature's unfathomable works, or Man's
Mysterious as her own – a ship that sails
The seas, the lifeless arch of stones in air
Suspended, the cerulean firmament
And what it is; the River that flows on
Perpetually, whence comes it, whither tends,
Going and never gone; the fish that moves
And lives in an element of death;
Or aught of more refin'd astonishment,
Such as the Skylark breeds, singing aloft
As if the Bird were native to the heavens,
There planted like a star: with these combine
Objects of fear, yet not without their own
Enjoyment – lightning and the thunder's roar,
Snow, rain and hail, and storm implacable.

So ends the period of Childhood; then the sensa-

tions are pondered and translated into simple ideas, Wonder and fear

> slacken in their hold,
> And the world's native produce, as it meets
> The sense with less habitual stretch of mind,
> Is ponder'd as a miracle, and words
> By frequent repetition take the place
> Of theories, repeated till faith grows
> Through acquiesence, and the name of God
> Stands fixed a keystone of the mighty arch.

The instinct of wonder is no longer satisfied by natural objects, so the mind turns to the universe of fable and romance, of fairy-tale and legend, to stories of magic and travellers' tales. 'Untutor'd minds stop here, and after-life leads them no further'; it is a poor mind that must rely on such artificial stimulation of the senses. But to the true mind will come

> Another soul, spring, centre of his being,
> And that is Nature. As his powers advance,
> He is not like a man who sees in the heavens
> A blue vault merely and a glittering cloud,
> One old familiar likeness over all,
> A superficial pageant, known too well
> To be regarded; he looks nearer, calls
> The stars out of their shy retreats, and parts

The milky stream into its separate forms,
Loses and finds again, when baffled most
Not least delighted.

And thus, as Professor de Sélincourt interprets the poem, man comes to realize 'the boundless field of thought offered to him by Nature, and he enters with a fuller understanding into that experience, familiar to him from childhood, in which sense merges with spirit. "Bodily eye and spiritual need" seem now to have become "one great faculty"'

And now
The first and earliest motions of his life,
I mean of his rememberable time,
Redound upon him with a stronger flood;
In speculation he is like a child,
With this advantage, that he now can rest
Upon himself; authority is none
To cheat him of his boldness, or hoodwink
His intuitions, or to lay asleep
The unquiet stir of his perplexities
And in this season of his second birth . . .
He feels that, be his mind however great
In aspiration, the universe in which
He lives is equal to his mind, that each
Is worthy of the other; if the one
Be insatiate, the other is inexhaustible.

At this stage, and here Wordsworth is closely following his own experiences:

> If upon mankind
> He looks, and on the human maladies
> Before his eyes, what finds he there to this
> Fram'd answerably? what but sordid men,
> And transient occupations, and desires
> Ignoble and deprav'd? Therefore he cleaves
> Exclusively to Nature as in her
> Finding his image, what he has, what lacks,
> His rest and his perfection.

But then comes the final stage, maturity. Insensibly while his mind has been given to the contemplation of Nature, 'in apparent slight of man and all the mild humanities,' 'subtle virtues' from the first and at every moment have been 'finding out their way' –

> Insensibly to nourish in the heart
> Its tender sympathies, to keep alive
> Those yearnings, and to strengthen them and shape,
> Which from the mother's breast were first receiv'd?
> The commonest images of nature – all,
> No doubt, are with this office charg'd – a path,
> A taper burning through the gloom of night,

Smoke breathing up by day from cottage trees,
A beauteous sunbeam in a sunny shed,
A garden with its walks and banks of flowers,
A churchyard, and the bell that tolls to church,
The roaring ocean and waste wilderness,
Familiar things and awful, the minute
And grand, are destined here to meet, are all
Subservient to one end, near or remote;
One service have in which they all partake: –
Namely, to make those gracious charities
Habits of ear and eye and every sense, –
Endearing union, without which the earth
Is valueless, even in its Maker's eye.

So the great union of Mind and Nature is consummated; by a process of association which links up, at every stage of life, experience and the experiencing self, leading from sensation to feeling, from feeling to thought, and then creating a union of all these faculties in God, who is the whole of Being.

I have dwelt long on this particular statement of Wordsworth's philosophy because I think it is very clear, not marred by artifice, and, in short, all sufficient. One could add many alternative statements from the *Prelude* and the *Excursion*, and support them by a number of the shorter poems; but I do not think these would in any way modify the simple lines of this exposition.

And yet there is one statement, in the *Tintern Abbey* poem, which though well-known, I must quote. It is the earliest definition of Wordsworth's philosophy of nature, and it is the best. Wordsworth has described what Nature meant to him as a boy and as a youth; but now the 'glad animal movements' of the first age and the passionate appetites and instinctive sympathies of the second age are no more. But there is 'abundant recompence' –

> For I have learned
> To look on nature, not as in the hour
> Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes
> The still, sad music of humanity,
> Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power
> To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean, and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
> A lover of the meadows and the woods,
> And mountains; and of all that we behold

From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye and ear, both what they half-create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

What shall we say of this philosophy to-day? Let us recognize in the first place that it is no merely mystical emotionalism. It is objective; it is based on a psychological theory, the most empirical of its day. It is realistic; the still sad music of humanity is often heard, with chastening effect. It is not strictly pantheistic; nature is not worshipped as an entity; the mighty world of eye and ear is without; manifesting the same sublime sense, but co-existent, not co-incident, with the mind of man; and though the same impulse animates all objects of all thoughts, the mind rises above the objects it contemplates, to the creation of a moral being, a soul.

But this philosophy is humanistic. It is the greatest exaltation of the mind of man that has ever been conceived. No wonder Blake found it blasphemous; for Wordsworth so elevates the human mind, that he leaves no room for a personal God. The individual mind

keeps her own
Inviolate retirement, subject there
To conscience only, and the law supreme
Of that Intelligence which governs all.

Conscience, and the supreme law of an impersonal intelligence – these are the sole arbiters, and the celebration of their grandeur will carry the poet beyond all finite conceptions. He 'must tread on shadowy ground, must sink'

Deep – and, aloft ascending, breath in worlds
To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil.
All strength – all terror, single or in bands,
That ever was put forth in personal form –
Jehovah – with his thunder, and the choir
Of shouting Angels, and the empyreal thrones –
I pass them unalarmed. Not Chaos, not
The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
By help of dreams – can breed such fear and awe
As fall upon us when we look
Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man –
My haunt, and the main region of my song.

Our attitude towards Wordsworth's philosophy must inevitably be our attitude towards humanism; it is the highest expression of humanism,

even of a scientific humanism, that the world has yet seen. The objection to humanism, and it seems to me to be a final one, is that it necessarily assumes this very infinitude of the human mind which inspired Wordsworth. That is an immense assumption. There is nothing in the history of humanity, nothing in our present experience, to justify such a belief. Rather everywhere we have evidence of the mind's finiteness, and mankind's limitation. If there is one general law of individual life, it reads: Thus far and no farther. What philosophy must we base on that fact? The choice can only lie between an extreme scepticism and an uncompromising supernaturalism. Either we are the sport of chance or the children of God. Wordsworth once confessed to Crabb Robinson* that the pressing difficulty on his mind had always been to reconcile the prescience of the Almighty with accountability in man. Exactly! The difficulty is not resolvable within the terms of his humanistic philosophy. Either God is prescient and in his will is our peace, or man is accountable to his own Conscience and Intelligence, and has no need of a God. There is no compromise between these alternatives. But Wordsworth pretended there was, and his whole philosophy is vitiated by this inherent inconsistency. Wordsworth knew this, and the last phase of his life

* April 19th, 1824, see *Diary*.

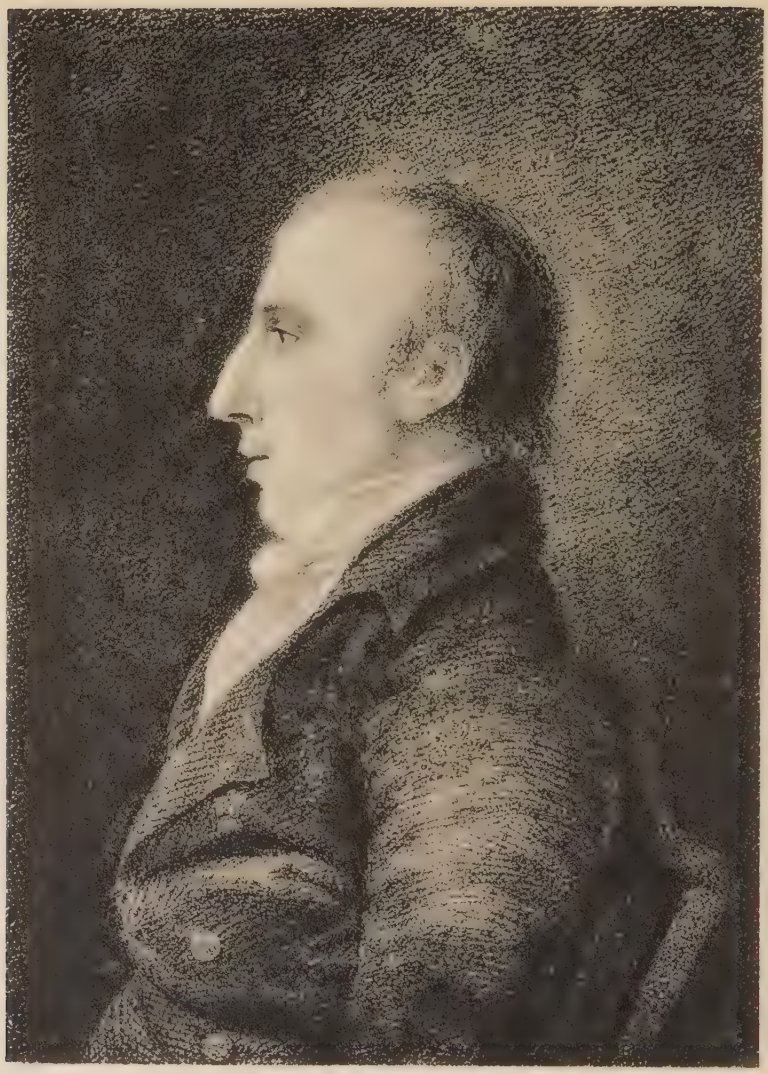
shows him vainly attempting to hide the disastrous significance of his philosophy of nature under a screen of orthodox beliefs. The attempt was doomed to failure, and involved all that was left of his poetic force.

CHAPTER VI

THE SELF ANNULLED

For this the passion to excess was driven –
That self might be annulled: her bondage prove
The fetters of a dream opposed to love.

Laodamia.



WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

After the drawing by W. Hancock
in the National Portrait Gallery (1798)

CHAPTER VI

THE SELF ANNULLED

WORDSWORTH was married to Mary Hutchinson on October 4th, 1802, but not before strange preliminaries had taken place. He left Grasmere with his sister on July 9th. They travelled across Yorkshire on foot and arrived at Gallow Hill, the Hutchinson's farm near Bedale, on the 16th. Ten days later, they took the postchaise to London, and then went by the Dover route to Calais, where they arrived on July 31st. There, by arrangement, Annette and her daughter Caroline were waiting for them, and there, to the astonishment of posterity, the party remained for a whole month.

The records relating to this meeting are extremely scanty, and we are left to conjecture the motives behind Wordsworth's action. A page in Dorothy's *Journal* and eight sonnets written by the poet are all we have to work from. From the *Journal* we learn that 'the weather was very hot. We walked by the sea-shore almost every evening with Annette and Caroline, or William and I

alone. I had a bad cold, and could not bathe at first, but William did . . . And we had delightful walks after the heat of the day was passed – seeing far off in the west the coast of England like a cloud crested with Dover castle . . . One night I shall never forget – the day had been very hot, and William and I walked alone together upon the pier. The sea was gloomy, for there was a blackness over all the sky, except when it was overspread with lightning, which often revealed to us a distant vessel. Near us the waves roared and broke against the pier, and they were interfused with greenish fiery light. The more distant sea always black and gloomy. It was also beautiful, on the calm hot night, to see the little boats tow out of the harbour with wings of fire, and the sail boats with the fiery track which they cast as they went along, and which closed up after them with a hundred thousand sparkles, and streams of glow-worm light. Caroline was delighted.'

Annette, you see, is not in the picture. As for the sonnets, they do not mention Annette, but breathe a growing distrust of her nation and its political ideals. Inspired by the same sunset described by Dorothy, Wordsworth wrote the famous sonnet beginning 'Fair Star of evening, Splendour of the west,' and ending with this despondent note:

I, with many a fear
For my dear Country, many heartfelt sighs,
Among men who do not love her, linger here.

And when once more he set foot in England, the poet cried,

'tis joy enough and pride
For one hour's perfect bliss, to tread the grass
Of England once again, and hear and see,
With such a dear Companion at my side.

But the Companion, of course, was Dorothy, not his future wife.

There can be no doubt that by this time Wordsworth's love for Annette was extinct. Why, then, did he stay so long at Calais, on the eve of his marriage to another woman. Perhaps Annette still hoped to marry him, and he sought to convince her, by the very incongruity of their present companionship, of the impossibility of a union. His peace of mind, the harmony of his whole life, now depended on a separation from this vivacious, empty* Frenchwoman of thirty-six. The dignity of his worldly existence

* Epithets justified by the tone of the two letters of Annette to Wordsworth which Professor Legouis has rescued from oblivion. See *William Wordsworth and Annette Vallon,* London, 1922, pp. 30–3. Professor Legouis comments: '. . . the dominant note is that of an irrepressible, exuberant sensibility which is a trait of her nature and is not exclusively due to the harassing circumstances in which the

(and Wordsworth had a very grand idea of his own dignity) would be hopelessly compromised if he returned to England with a French wife and a daughter already ten years old. So much he had decided long before he came to Calais. But we do not know how far he had prepared Annette for this renunciation. Perhaps not at all. He could be very clumsy in his personal relationships, as he was to prove later in life when he quarrelled, first with Coleridge, and then with De Quincey. Another motive that may have kept him at Calais was his attachment to Caroline, his love-child, and apparently an attractive little girl.

In after years, Dorothy kept up a correspondence with Annette or Caroline, until her own insanity closed the story. Wordsworth himself does not seem to have written to them ever again. In fact, he grew curiously callous about the whole affair, as is shown by two incidents in his later life. In 1820, accompanied by his wife and Dorothy, a newly-married couple named Monkhouse, a Miss Horrocks and Crabb Robinson, he concluded a continental tour at Paris, where the party stayed twenty-six days. They took lodgings in the street where Annette and her daughter, the latter now married to a clerk named

letters were written. She abounded in words, was prone to effusions and tears.' (p. 13.) 'Although inexhaustibly voluble when she pours out her heart, she seems to be devoid of intellectual curiosity. She is an afflicted lover, a doting mother. . . Her sentimental absorption is complete. The pathetic strain never relapses.' (p. 33.)

Martin Baudouin, were living. Wordsworth had the melancholy pleasure of introducing his wife to Annette, and a frequent exchange of visits took place. In case you should think my treatment of this incident unnecessarily sarcastic, I would remind you of another incident, that took place much later. In the year 1849, Ellis Yarnall came on a pilgrimage from America, and was received in a friendly manner by the Wordsworths. Yarnall sent a full account of his visit to an American professor, Henry Reed, a great Wordsworthian in his day. In this account we find the following passage:

'France was our next subject, and one which seemed very near his heart. He had been much in that country at the outbreak of the Revolution, and afterwards during its wildest excesses. At the time of the September massacres he was in Orleans. Addressing Mrs. Wordsworth he said, "I wonder how I came to stay there so long, and at a period so exciting."' – *Grosart*, III, 479.

That is rather ghoulish humour in an old and venerable poet, and surely justifies a sarcastic tone. Annette had died in Paris on January 10th, 1841, in poor circumstances. Her name in the register of deaths reads: Marie Anne Vallon, *dite William.**

* It is only fair to add that Wordsworth made some provision for his daughter from the time of her marriage in February, 1816. This took the form of an annuity for £30, which continued until 1835 when

To return to the year 1802, Wordsworth and Dorothy, on their return from Calais, stayed three weeks in London. More sonnets were written, including the one *Upon Westminster Bridge.*

Earth has not anything to show more fair . . .

perhaps the most perfect of all the sonnets. But in most of them the tide of his invective rises against France, reaching the utmost absurdity of prejudice in those lines in which he denies any genius or glory to the great men of France:

Perpetual emptiness! unceasing change!
No single volume paramount, no code,
No master spirit, no determined road;
But equally a want of books and men!

The psychological closure was now complete. The memory of Annette was exorcised: an uneasy conscience was salved with this moral bombast against a nation associated, if only subconsciously, with the circumstances of his early loss of self-esteem.

Wordsworth's marriage with Mary Hutchinson was a tragic event for Dorothy. Writing to a friend five days before the event, she says:

the annuity was commuted for a final settlement of £400. The evidence for this is fully set forth in a letter from Miss Edith C. Batho printed in *The Times Literary Supplement* of April 3rd, 1930.

'If this letter reaches you before next Monday, you will think of me travelling towards our own dear Grasmere with my most beloved brother and his wife. I have long loved Mary Hutchinson as a sister, and she is greatly attached to me; this being so, you will guess that I look forward to this connection between us; but, happy as I was, I half dread that concentration of all tender feelings past, present, and future, which will come upon me on the wedding morning.'*

And on the wedding morning she accordingly behaved in the neurotic manner she had anticipated. She writes in her *Journal:*

'On Monday, October 4th, 1802, my brother William was married to Mary Hutchinson. I slept a good deal of the night, and rose fresh and well in the morning. At a little after eight o'clock, I saw them go down the avenue towards the church. William had parted from me upstairs. When they were absent, my dear little Sara prepared the breakfast. I kept myself as quiet as I could, but when I saw the two men running up the walk, coming to tell us it was over, I could stand it no longer, and threw myself on the bed, where I lay in stillness, neither hearing nor seeing anything till Sara came upstairs to me, and said, "They are coming." This forced me from the bed

* Harper, II, 36. From a manuscript letter in the possession of Mr. Marshall.

where I lay, and I moved, I knew not how, straight forward, faster than my strength could carry me, till I met my beloved William, and fell upon his bosom.'

Immediately after the wedding Wordsworth with his wife and sister set off for home. The return journey across Yorkshire is described with great feeling by Dorothy in her *Journal*, but she manages to suffuse her description with a wistful melancholy. She notices most feelingly the places and scenes where she and William *alone* had been happy, and takes a sad farewell of them. Wordsworth wrote two sonnets – one on the captivity of Mary Queen of Scots ('Hard was thy durance, poor Queen Mary, compared with ours') which has not been preserved, and a gloomy one about a sunset ('Dark and more dark the shades of evening fell') in which the marvellous objects suggested to 'the eye of silent rapture' by the glowing west are felt to be vain, for 'they are of the sky, And from our earthly memory fade away.' It was dark when they reached home. 'I cannot describe what I felt,' writes Dorothy. 'We went by candle light into the garden, and were astonished at the growth of the brooms, Portugal laurels, etc., etc., etc.'

The scene was set for the remainder of Wordsworth's life – forty-eight years. The plan of this book does not allow any detailed record of this

period, nor do I think, that apart from the general critical problem involved in such a change of temperament and mentality, that this period is of any public interest. All that remains to outline before proceeding to this critical problem is a general sketch of Wordsworth's later life, dealing with his personal relationships and the nature of his limited activities.

Of personal influences, that of Dorothy remained predominant. The abnormal affection that existed between brother and sister – abnormal because of its intensity – persisted in its customary mode, especially on Dorothy's side. The advent of Mary Hutchinson does not seem to have made any difference to her. But why should it, when the far more disturbing element of Coleridge left her feeling towards her brother intact? Dorothy's feelings for Coleridge are often referred to as though there was an open question. It seems to me there can be no doubt in the matter at all: she was desperately in love with him, and many a passage in her *Journals* betrays the fact. Here are a few typical entries:

1800. 2nd September. – . . . I walked with Coleridge and Wm. up the lane and by the church, and then lingered with Coleridge in the garden. John and Wm. were both gone to bed, and all the lights out.

1801. 10th November. – Poor C. left us . . .

C. had a sweet day for his ride. Every sight and every sound reminded me of him – dear, dear fellow, of his many walks [?talks] to us by day and night, of all dear things. I was melancholy, and could not talk, but at last I eased my heart by weeping – nervous blubbering, says William. It is not so. O! how many, many reasons have I to be anxious for him.

11th November. – Put aside dearest C.'s letters. . . .

12th December. – The birches on the crags beautiful, red brown and glittering. The ashes glittering spears with their upright stems. The hips very beautiful, and so good! ! and, dear Coleridge! I ate twenty for thee, when I was by myself.

There are many such passages with a similar implication, so who can doubt the state of Dorothy's feelings? But whether Coleridge was ever aware of her passion, no one can say. His own letters are entirely non-committal. If he ever mentions Dorothy, it is always without epithet, coldly, indifferently. Perhaps something has been suppressed – so much has been suppressed in this circle of relationships. All that we know we gather from Dorothy's *Journal:* he liked to linger in the garden with her by night, to go solitary walks with her, to sit up alone with her into the small hours. But I think Coleridge was the kind

of man who might have done all that without becoming aware of the fact that his companion was in love with him.

A first child was born to the Wordsworths a bare nine months after the wedding. Mary was scarcely on her feet again when Wordsworth and Dorothy, accompanied by Coleridge, went off on a tour in Scotland, and were away six weeks. Dorothy wrote an account of this tour, which is a book of considerable charm and interest. It does not, however, tell us much of the feelings entertained for each other by the travellers. The tour was not a success; after a fortnight Coleridge parted from the Wordsworths, apparently at Wordsworth's suggestion. According to Coleridge 'Wordsworth's hypochondriacal feelings kept him silent and self-centred'*. Dorothy merely says that Coleridge was too unwell to proceed further with them. But far from turning back, Coleridge struck north, happy to be alone. 'I am enjoying myself, having Nature with solitude and liberty – the liberty natural and solitary, the solitude natural and free!'† There seems little doubt that the friendship between the two poets was becoming strained. Even at the height of their friendship, in a letter to Thomas Poole written on May 6th, 1799,‡ Coleridge had seized on the

* Coleridge, *Letters*, I, 431.
† *Op. cit.* 434.
‡ *Op. cit.* 297.

fundamental divergence in their temperaments. 'My many weaknesses are of some advantage to me; they unite me more with the great mass of my fellow-beings – but dear Wordsworth appears to me to have hurtfully segregated and isolated his being. Doubtless his delights are more deep and sublime; but he has likewise more hours that prey upon the flesh and blood.' Wordsworth was then talking about retiring into his northern fastness, and I think that Coleridge saw the danger. Dangerous it certainly was, and although other factors contributed to the decay of his poetical faculties, this was a primary one. You cannot at the same time deny society and keep in contact with it. But poetry is a mode of communication between one man and his fellows; it is a subtle state of mind which whatever some minor poets may have said to the contrary, is not entirely self-generated. It is a state of mind buttressed with social contacts – a point of intersection of individual and group: in some sense a concentration in the individual of social or universal consciousness.

'Feeling comes in aid of feeling' – that continues to be the basis of Wordsworth's poetic activity. But a poet who has hurtfully segregated and isolated his being, both externally by divorcing himself from a critical and masculine society, and internally by denying his instinctive love and

making merely a placid convention of marriage – such a poet is killing his feelings at the root. Composition becomes more and more difficult – more and more an enervating experience. In 1798 *Tintern Abbey* had been composed and memorised in its entirety on the road between Tintern and Bristol, and not a line of it subsequently altered. From the moment they settled at Grasmere, Dorothy begins to record the pains of literary travail. Wordsworth works at all hours and with the utmost concentration. He makes himself tired and physically ill. There are many references in the *Journals* and Letters of this kind:

1800. Sept. 10th. (Letter to Mrs. Marshall): 'William's health is by no means strong . . . and he writes with so much feeling and agitation that it brings on a sense of pain.'

1801. 23rd December. '. . . William worked at *The Ruined Cottage*, and made himself very ill . . .'

'On Saturday, 30th, Wm. worked at *The Pedlar* all the morning. He kept the dinner waiting till four o'clock. He was much tired . . .'

'Tuesday, 2nd February. . . . William wished to break off composition, but was unable, and so did himself harm.'

That was in 1802. Between 1802 and 1807 many of his best poems were written, though

evidently with progressively less spontaneity. Nothing sustained of the highest reach of his poetic powers was, indeed, written after 1803. Now a poet may be regarded as a very sensitive instrument which only records under certain conditions. This instrument is easily thrown out of gear by magnetic forces obtruding into its vicinity. Such are obsessions, fixed ideas, inhibitions, and repressed psychological factors generally. Poetry is dependent in the first place on a certain condition of sensibility in the poet. It is dependent in the second place on the freedom with which that sensibility is allowed to operate. In a subsidiary sense, it is dependent on the track of that sensibility – the direction in which it operates. The first condition is innate, the second determined by environment, the third acquired by the exercise of will. We are considering, in Wordsworth's case, the second condition, which is the condition under which a great poet is most often thwarted; for the other conditions, innate sensibility and power of will, are quite indispensable to all genuine poetry. But it is not every putative poet that can satisfy the second of these conditions and dominate his environment, more especially the environment provided by his own emotions.

Let us examine the process of inhibition in a particular instance. I will take the poem

Laodamia because it is very nearly a great poem, and because it is one which Wordsworth tells us (in the Fenwick Notes published by Grosart) cost him more trouble than almost anything of equal length he ever wrote. It was composed in 1814. The poem opens with Laodamia beseeching the Gods to restore her slaughtered husband, Protesilaus. Hermes appears and tells her that her prayer has been heard, and that her husband will be restored to her for three hours. It was no vain shadow that returned to her, but a lover to whom she could cry:

> Redundant are thy locks, thy lips as fair
> As when their breath enriched Thessalian air.

and:

> Come, blooming Hero, place thee by my side!
> Give, on this well-known couch, one nuptial kiss
> To me, this day, a second time thy bride!

But on this scene, we are told, Jove frowned in heaven, and Protesilaus thus addresses his forward bride:

> Be taught, O faithful Consort, to control
> Rebellious passion: for the Gods approve
> The depth, and not the tumult, of the soul;
> A fervent, not ungovernable, love.

Thy transports moderate; and meekly mourn
When I depart, for brief is my sojourn . . .

And then, having calmed Laodamia's passion,

He spake of love, such love as Spirits feel
In worlds whose course is equable and pure.

He spake at some length of this serener world, and of the virtuous self-sacrifice by which he had gained entry there. His final advice to Laodamia was:

by fortitude to seek
Our blest re-union in the shades below.

His counsel culminating in a famous verse which has been quoted *at* successive generations of young people ever since it was published:

Learn, by a mortal yearning, to ascend –
Seeking a higher object. Love was given,
Encouraged, sanctioned, chiefly for that end;
For this the passion to excess was driven –
That self might be annulled: her bondage prove
The fetters of a dream opposed to love.

By then the three hours of grace had expired! Hermes reappears; Protesilaus 'through the portal

takes his silent way,' and Laodamia is left a lifeless corpse on the floor.

You might think that sufficient poetic justice had been meted out to the lady; she had been cheated of what she most desired and severely lectured for three hours upon the enormity of her passion for her wedded husband. That was Wordsworth's first feeling; he recommended mercy:

> Ah, judge her gently who so deeply loved!
> Her, who, in reason's spite, yet without crime,
> Was in a trance of passion thus removed;
> Delivered from the galling yoke of time
> And these frail elements – to gather flowers
> Of blissful quiet 'mid unfading bowers.'

Thus stood the sentence in the first edition of the poem, published in 1815. But in 1827, true to the maxim that no moralist is so severe as a reformed rake, Wordsworth made a change in this verse which subjects the shameless woman to a much sterner fate:

> By no weak pity might the Gods be moved;
> She who thus perished not without the crime
> Of Lovers that in Reason's spite have loved,
> Was doomed to wander in a grosser clime
> Apart from happy Ghosts – that gather flowers
> Of blissful quiet 'mid unfading bowers.

In later editions the sentence was slightly mitigated – a purgatory of limited duration was substituted for eternal damnation. But that is a detail. For what is important to notice is not the manifest hypocrisy of the poem, in a man of Wordsworth's temperament, nor the inhumanity of his moral sentiments, but the fact that here we find him allowing moral judgments to interfere with his poetic sensibility. I do not mean that a moral judgment cannot be expressed poetically; some of the finest poetry in our language is the expression of moral sentiments. But a legend like this of Laodamia is apprehended by the poet in a direct relationship, and as a whole. To be apprehended poetically a narrative must be apprehended as a unity, and the emotional reaction is single and unique. Wordsworth's own theories of poetry everywhere imply a direct link between emotion and experience, and between poetic composition and experience. Feeling is controlled by thought, but thought itself is the product of experience – of the same elementary sensations that give rise to emotion. There is no external authority, no *a priori* conditions to which the poet's muse must submit. If Wordsworth's emotional attitude towards the immoderate passion of Laodamia changed between the years 1815 and 1827, what caused the change, we might ask? The

story remained the same. If anyone changed, it was Wordsworth. May we not suggest, indeed, that the poet was castigating his own conscience? That the memory of his own immoderate passion still preyed on his mind, and that into the hapless figure of Laodamia he was merely projecting the moral condemnation of his own youthful conduct! In that case the conflict which operated to the detriment of his poetry was one of confused motives: the story of Laodamia was not felt objectively enough, for it was confused with his own mental history.

In such a manner I think we can explain the gradual decay of Wordsworth's poetic powers. Either there was no spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings of any kind – just mere prose rhetoric; or the feelings were crossed by the poet's own inhibitions, and thus reduced to confusion. Other causes have been suggested. Thus, Professor Garrod puts it down to the withdrawal of Coleridge's influence. Coleridge he regards as 'the guardian angel of Wordsworth's poetical genius.' 'Perhaps,' he goes on to say, 'Coleridge's greatest work is Wordsworth – and, like all his other work, Coleridge left it unfinished. If there was any medicine for the decline of power which stole over Wordsworth's poetry after 1807, it was perhaps to be sought from Coleridge. From Coleridge Wordsworth

had derived the elements of his metaphysic; and his genius died of a metaphysical atrophy.'* It will be evident how strongly I must disagree with this interpretation of Wordsworth's decline. I have already, in a previous chapter, thrown doubt on this common assumption that Wordsworth owed much in the way of either ideas or technique to Coleridge. What he did owe to Coleridge was a sympathetic understanding and encouragement. Nor can I agree that Wordsworth's genius died of a metaphysical atrophy. His genius, unlike Coleridge's, was not really of the metaphysical order. It was sensational. There is little of the *a priori* philosopher in Wordsworth. Wordsworth may have suffered from the withdrawal of Coleridge's intelligent criticism; but the decay in Wordsworth's powers had set in long before this withdrawal and the cause is to be sought in the psychological development of Wordsworth himself.

The relations between Coleridge and Wordsworth reached breaking point in the summer of 1811. In the previous year there had been a proposal that Coleridge, who was almost a physical wreck by this time, should go to live with Basil Montagu, an old friend of both Wordsworth and Coleridge, and a man of some means. Coleridge declares in his letters that he was not very

* *Wordsworth: Lectures and Essays*, 2nd Edn. 29–30, 1927.

fond of Montagu, and had no intention of accepting his offer. But he wanted to get away from Grasmere, where he had for some time been the guest of Wordsworth, and since his wife would not consent to his travelling alone, he seized on this opportunity of escape. But before they left, Wordsworth took Montagu aside and told him that he had given up hope of Coleridge's regeneration and that he (Montagu) would only find Coleridge a nuisance as a guest. Nevertheless, Coleridge accompanied Montagu and a few days later in an imprudent moment Montagu told Coleridge all that Wordsworth had said. The self-appointed censors of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's correspondence have done their best to prevent the world knowing what were the actual words which Montagu attributed to Wordsworth. Apparently he said, among other things, that Coleridge 'for years past had been an absolute nuisance in the family.'* Further, Wordsworth is said to have used some far from elegant phrase to the effect that Coleridge had 'rotted his entrails out' with drink and drugs†. This 'three-fourth calumny' burst, said Coleridge, 'like a thunderstorm from a blue sky, on my soul, after fifteen years of such religious, almost superstitious idolatry and self-sacrifice.‡' Later, when

* Coleridge, *Letters*, II, 578.
† Morley, *Selections*, 151.
‡ *Letters*, II, 612.

he heard that Coleridge was suffering from the cruel insult, Wordsworth was reported to have said that he could not take seriously the mental anguish of a man who powdered his hair – poor Coleridge having first done this to prevent catching a cold after his hair had been thinned. The estrangement lasted a whole year, Wordsworth maintaining an attitude of stubborn indifference, Coleridge broken-hearted, tearful, anguished in body and mind. Finally, through the mediation of Henry Crabb Robinson, a reconciliation was effected in May, 1812 – Wordsworth denying having used the exact words imputed to him by Montagu, and entirely repudiating their spirit. Coleridge eagerly accepted Wordsworth's explanation, sincerely averring that never for a moment had he ceased to love and revere Wordsworth. But the *feeling* between the two poets was never the same again. 'All outward actions,' wrote Coleridge to Thomas Poole* 'all inward wishes, all thoughts and admirations will be the same – are the same, but – aye, there remains an immedicable *But*.'

The course of this estrangement, and the long and difficult negotiations that led up to this reconciliation, make up a story much too detailed to be repeated now. It is a distressing incident in the life of Wordsworth, but it was necessary to

* *Letters*, II, 612.

mention it in order to illustrate a development in Wordsworth's character. He was becoming hard. Our sympathies in this affair cannot help being with Coleridge. He may have been weak-willed and irresolute; he must most certainly have been a nuisance to any household he lived with; but he was a man of some nobility even in his suffering, and his genius and his long devotion to Wordsworth did not call for a judicial attitude in a friend so near and dear. Wordsworth behaved like a moral prig. Charles Lamb, who was a spectator of the whole affair, blamed Wordsworth. He even tried to dissuade Crabb Robinson from attempting a reconciliation. He was of the opinion that any attempt to bring Wordsworth and Coleridge together must prove ineffectual. He thought Wordsworth *cold.**

This coldness was exhibited a few years later to another friend, De Quincey. Towards the end of 1809 De Quincey came to live near Grasmere, and was warmly welcomed by the Wordsworths, who were glad to have such a cultured friend for neighbour. But De Quincey fell in love with the daughter of a small freeholder in the district. It was not until he had had several children by her that he decided to marry her. This he did in 1816, and he then invited the Wordsworths to

* See *Diary*, May 9th, 1812.

visit him. Wordsworth, who himself had an illegitimate daughter whose mother he had *not* married, took up a high moral attitude and declined the invitation! No wonder that De Quincey's friendship turned to gall, and that in subsequent years he had many bitter things to say about Wordsworth's personality.

It is perhaps impossible to realise the atmosphere of the Wordsworth household in the settled period at Rydal Mount, which lasted from 1813 to his death in 1850, without soaking one's self in the considerable mass of dull correspondence which survives from these years. It is an atmosphere of domestic tyranny and provincial narrowness; of decaying sensibility and the slow growth of a thick shell of convention – conventional religion, conventional morality, and worst of all, conventional poetry. A dreadful deadness descends on everything that Wordsworth writes. Occasionally, perhaps when he recalls some memory of his youth or early manhood, the fire revives in a solitary verse or stanza; more rarely when he unconsciously betrays his suppressed remorse, as when he wrote these lines on Burns, which surely reveal the passionate nature of Wordsworth's own disillusionment:

> Sweet Mercy! to the gates of Heaven
> This Minstrel lead, his sins forgiven;

The rueful Conflict, the heart riven
With vain endeavour,
And memory of Earth's bitter leaven,
Effaced for ever.

But why to Him confine the prayer,
When kindred thoughts and yearnings bear
On the frail heart the purest share
With all that live? –
The best of what we do and are,
Just God, forgive!

I get the distinct impression, not only from this poem, but from a general study of the records of his later life, that Wordsworth's heart too was riven with vain endeavour. He once said that no one could understand his poetry who did not realise that he was the happiest of men. He declared to Crabb Robinson, in discussing his own work:

'If men are to become better, the poems will sooner or later find admirers. . . . But no one has completely understood me – not even Coleridge. He is not happy enough. I am myself one of the happiest of men and no man who lives a life of constant bustle and whose happiness depends on the opinions of others can possibly comprehend the best of my poems.'* That was said in May, 1812, about the time of his reconciliation with

* Morley, *Selections*, 49.

Coleridge, but even here I think there is a note of anxiety. He is persuading himself that he is happy because he is independent of the opinions of others. The real truth is that there has rarely been a poet who reacted so violently to the criticisms directed on his poems. He poured scorn on any reviewer who ventured to question his greatness, his equality with Milton, his perfect felicity and moral effectiveness. The womenfolk in his house had to smuggle the Reviews in surreptitiously, for he could not bear the sight of one; they made him physically ill.

His vanity was enormous, but it was more than his vanity that suffered when, in 1814, the *Excursion* was published. Apart from the effusions of a few uncritical friends it was received with something like dismay. His whole being was shattered. Here was the first pattern of his great life-work: the work to which he had already, in the unpublished *Prelude*, devoted the best of his poetic powers, the work upon which the whole ideal conception of himself and his destiny depended. It failed. It was nowhere received with enthusiasm; even Crabb Robinson, who might always be counted on for generous praise, feared that the poem might possibly draw on Wordsworth 'the imputation of dulness.' But Wordsworth waited for only one verdict – that of the friend who had inspired him to write the

poem, and whose judgment he knew was the most sensitive and intelligent of the age – the verdict of Coleridge. It was nine months before Coleridge ventured to express himself, and then only in response to Wordsworth's own direct appeal. But when it came Coleridge's letter was both courageous and subtle: courageous in its frankness, and subtle in its argument. He openly confesses his disappointment. He confessed that '*comparatively* with the *former* poem' (*i.e.* the *Prelude*) the *Excursion*, as far as it was new to him, did not come up to his expectations. He had expected:

> An Orphic song indeed!
> A song divine of high and passionate truths,
> To their own music chaunted!

What he found was something very different – an inferiority which he conjectured 'might have been occasioned by the influence of self-established convictions having given to certain thoughts and expressions a depth and force which they had not for readers in general.' That is a very acute perception and Wordsworth, who knew the difference between real and unreal poetry as well as Coleridge, must have recognised its truth. He must have known, that except in so far as the *Excursion* was a patchwork of earlier com-

positions, it was animated by the wrong kind of energy. Its sentiments were not poetic at all, but moral; it was grounded, not in immediate sensation, but on ratiocination; it was, as Coleridge implied in a simile he used, sapless. Keats said much the same, three years later, of Wordsworth in general, but with obvious reference to the *Excursion*. In his letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, dated February 3rd, 1818, he writes: '. . . for the sake of a few fine imaginative or domestic passages, are we to be bullied into a certain philosophy engendered in the whims of an egotist? Every man has his speculations, but every man does not brood and peacock over them till he makes a false coinage and deceives himself . . . We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us, and, if we do not agree, seems to put its hand into its breeches pocket. Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul and does not startle it or amaze it with itself, but with its subject.'

Coleridge's letter leads on to a discussion of the nature of philosophical poetry which I must leave for my final chapter. For the moment let us note that Coleridge was not alone. He had been preceded in the expression of his disappointment by Hazlitt, by Lamb (in spite of himself), by De Quincey, indeed I think by every intelligent critic of the time, including Jeffrey. For Jeffrey

was an intelligent critic, though rather a priggish one, and his main criticism of the *Excursion* was the same as that of Coleridge and of Keats, but more violently expressed:

'The volume before us,' he wrote, 'if we were to describe it very shortly, we should characterise as a tissue of moral and devotional ravings, in which innumerable changes are rung upon a few very simple and familiar ideas: – But with such an accompaniment of long words, long sentences, and unwieldy phrases – and such a hubbub of strained raptures and fantastical sublimities, that it is often difficult for the most skilful and attentive student to obtain a glimpse of the author's meaning – and altogether impossible for an ordinary reader to conjecture what he is about. Moral and religious enthusiasm, though undoubtedly poetical emotions, are at the same time but dangerous inspirers of poetry: nothing being so apt to run into interminable dulness of mellifluous extravagance without giving the unfortunate author the slightest intimation of his danger. His laudable zeal for the efficacy of his preachments, he very naturally mistakes for the ardour of poetical inspiration – and, while dealing out the high words and glowing phrases which are so readily supplied by themes of this description, can scarcely avoid believing that he is eminently original and impressive – All sorts of

common-place notions and expressions are sanctified in his eyes, by the sublime ends for which they are employed: and the mystical verbiage of the Methodist pulpit is repeated till the speaker entertains no doubt that he is the chosen organ of divine truth and persuasion.'

I am not going to take it upon myself to defend the *Excursion*. Indeed for me it is but the final proof of my theory: Wordsworth had so frustrated his feelings that he was no longer capable of sustained poetic expression. The *Excursion* fails on two scores: it fails because it has no convincing structure, no visual or allegorical unity: and it fails because it has not sufficient verbal harmony or felicity to justify it in any less unified conception. Poetry has two modes of beauty: the dramatic or visual, and the verbal or aural; the highest poetry unites both; great poetry can be sustained on one of them; Wordsworth, in the *Excursion*, perseveres in neither.

CHAPTER VII

THIS MINSTREL . . .

Sweet Mercy! to the gates of Heaven
This Minstrel lead, his sins forgiven;
The rueful conflict, the heart riven
With vain endeavour,
And memory of Earth's bitter leaven
Effaced for ever.

Thoughts suggested near the Residence of Burns

CHAPTER VII

THIS MINSTREL . . .

Now that I have reached the later life of Wordsworth, I take leave of his personality with distinct feelings of relief. As I have already explained, it is possible to make this dichotomy of personality and poetry because in all great art the personality is so objectified in the work of art, that this latter product becomes a thing apart – crystalline and frangible. But before finally dismissing Wordsworth's personality, I must refer to one aspect of his life to which I fear it may be thought I have not given sufficient attention: I mean its political aspect. In most people's conception of Wordsworth, what is known as his 'apostasy' looms large. I have already suggested that the change in his political opinions was at any rate made psychologically credible by the necessity of his creating in his own conscience some compensation for his want of faith towards Annette, some escape from the stings of 'viperous remorse.' That was the negative aspect of the case. From a dislike and distrust of the French nation, Wordsworth progressed towards a disbelief in those revolutionary

doctrines which he had imbibed in France, in circumstances closely associated with Annette. Annette herself was never a republican, and became in fact a fanatical royalist. But that, I think, counts for nothing; there was nothing in the relationship between Wordsworth and Annette that implied an exchange of intellectual ideas.

An explanation of Wordsworth's change of opinion does not excuse him from any moral responsibility in the matter. Apostasy is not too strong a word to use. People who try to explain away this charge of apostasy usually argue that Wordsworth may have been a revolutionary at one period, but only in his youth, and that in his maturity he developed those conservative principles which ever after distinguished his thought. I do not know how long a man's youth is supposed to last, but the zenith of Wordsworth's revolutionary phase was reached in the years 1792-1794, that is to say, when he was between twenty-two and twenty-four years old. And at that time he was no mere vague advocate of ideal liberty. In his 'Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff' written in 1793, he urged, among other measures, the use of violence to overthrow despotism, the confiscation of the possessions of the Church in France, manhood suffrage, the referendum, the abolition of the laws of inheritance, the equality of income, and declared himself generally in favour of a

republic. In 1794 he wrote to his friend Mathews in these fierce terms:

'I solemnly affirm that in no writings of mine will I ever admit of any sentiment which can have the least tendency to induce my readers to suppose that the doctrines which are now enforced by banishment, imprisonment, etc., etc., are other than pregnant with every species of misery. You know perhaps already that I am of that odious class of men called democrats, and of that class I shall ever continue.'

It would be merely cynical to contrast these declarations of revolutionary faith with Wordsworth's later sentiments. The rising figure of Napoleon was the immediate symbol round which he built his reaction. By 1803 he was joining the volunteers, drilling two or three times a week, and Dorothy says 'surely there never was a more determined hater of the French, nor one more willing to do his utmost to destroy them if they really do come.'* From this state of emotional reaction, to a rationalised Toryism of uncompromising rigidity, was but a natural development. Even an old friend like Crabb Robinson, who was something of a Whig, when he visited Wordsworth had to regard politics as taboo, for a disagreement on this subject made the poet ill.

* Letter of Oct. 9, 1803 to Mrs. Clarkson. Knight, *Letters*, I, 151.

In 1809 Wordsworth published his pamphlet on the Convention of Cintra, his most considerable contribution to the positive side of his conservative doctrines. I cannot share the unreserved admiration which some people have expressed for the literary merits of this work. It has passages of sincerity and originality, but in the main it is a pompous imitation of the worst rhetorical excesses of Milton, utterly lacking in clarity and concision, and only occasionally rising to some degree of imaginative conviction. Its original contribution to political thought is the doctrine of Nationalism – the doctrine that independence should be secured for all communities linked together by a common language and common institutions, and that such communities should exist alongside each other in a permanent state of equilibrium produced by the equal but opposite forces of self-assertion. In some features of this doctrine Wordsworth to a great extent foreshadowed Mazzini and Garibaldi; but in a more chastened mood we may be more inclined to regard him as the prophet of a polity that reached its natural conclusion in the world war of 1914–1918.

I will mention one further step in Wordsworth's political career: it is a pamphlet entitled 'Two Addresses to the Freeholders of Westmoreland,' issued in 1818 on the occasion of a local parlia-

mentary election, when the Tory candidate, a son of Wordsworth's patron the Earl of Londsale, was opposed by that brilliant Whig, Henry Brougham. I need say nothing of this pamphlet but that it contradicts every sentiment and doctrine of the 'Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff,' written twenty-five years earlier. It caused Shelley to write these bitter words:

'What a beastly and pitiful wretch that Wordsworth! That such a man should be such a poet! I can compare him with no one but Simonides, that flatterer of the Sicilian tyrants, and at the same time the most natural and tender of lyric poets.'

This outburst of Shelley's brings us back to the remark with which I began this chapter; that we can, luckily, dissociate the poetry of Wordsworth from his personality, and consider the poetry in its impersonal purity. Our first need is to dismiss a certain conception which Wordsworth had of himself as a poet. This is perhaps most definitely expressed in a letter he wrote to Lady Beaumont in May, 1807,* just after the appearance of the two volumes of the Poems of that year. He writes with much feeling, and with that mingling of modesty and asseveration which is never a sign of equanimity:

'It is impossible that any expectations can be

* Knight, *Letters*, I, 301–10.

lower than mine concerning the immediate effect of this little work upon what is called the public. I do not here take into consideration the envy and malevolence, and all the bad passions which always stand in the way of a work of any merit from a living poet; but merely think of the pure absolute honest ignorance, in which all worldlings of every rank and situation must be enveloped, with respect to the thoughts, feelings and images, on which the life of my poems depends. The things which I have taken, whether from within or without, what have they do to with routs, dinners, morning calls, hurry from door to door, from street to street, on foot or in carriage: with Mr. Pitt, or Mr. Fox, Mr. Paul or Sir Francis Burdett, the Westminster election or the borough of Honiton? In a word . . . what have they to do with a life without love? In such a life there can be no thought, for we have no thought (save thoughts of pain) but as far as we have love and admiration.'

Then, after remarking that to be incapable of a feeling of poetry, in his sense of the word, is to be without love of human nature and reverence for God, he begins to define his own attitude towards his poems. 'Trouble not yourself upon their present reception; of what moment is that compared with what I trust is their destiny? to console the afflicted; to add sunshine to day-

light, by making the happy happier; to teach the young and the gracious of every age to see, to think, and feel; and, therefore, to become more actively and securely virtuous; this is their office, which I trust they will faithfully perform, long after we (that is, all that is mortal of us) are mouldered in our graves.'

It might seem to many, Wordsworth goes on to say, that I overrate my own exertions. 'I am not, however, afraid of such censure, insignificant as probably the majority of those poems would appear to very respectable persons. I do not mean London wits and witlings, for these have too many foul passions about them to be respectable, even if they had more intellect than the benign laws of Providence will allow to such a heartless existence as theirs is; but grave, kindly-natured, worthy persons, who would be pleased if they could. I hope that these volumes are not without some recommendations, even for readers of this class: but their imagination has slept; and the voice which is the voice of my poetry, without imagination, cannot be heard.'

After defending certain individual poems (and he is not afraid to call them 'essentially poetic), he makes some very definite statements about the nature of his poetry. 'There is scarcely one of my poems which does not aim to direct the attention to some moral sentiment, or to some

general principle, or law of thought, or of our intellectual constitution.' And he concludes: 'I doubt not that you will share with me an invincible confidence that my writings (and among them these little poems) will co-operate with the benign tendencies in human nature and society, wherever found; and that they will, in their degree, be efficacious in making men wiser, better, and happier.'

'Invincible confidence' is perhaps one of the characteristics of all great men of action; but it is not attractive in the eyes of feebler mortals. Most of us would prefer less of such grandeur, and more humility. I do not think we should be far wrong in stating that more humility would have made Wordsworth a better poet; for the more we consider his development the more it seems to be one of prosaic pretensions overlying and finally overwhelming a strong native sensibility. This is the real tragedy of Wordsworth's poetic career, and becomes most painfully obvious the nearer we approach that great work to which he said he was to devote the prime of his life, and the chief force of his mind – 'a moral and philosophical poem, the subject whatever I find most interesting in Nature, Man, and Society.'* Coleridge was perhaps not wrong in considering Wordsworth fitted for this great task – at the age of twenty-

* *Letters*, I, 161.

eight or twenty-nine he seemed to have enough sensibility and enough intellect. But by the time Wordsworth was free to turn to this task, his sensibility was blunted. He went on, trying to build up the structure of a philosophical poem with talent, with intelligence, with memory – with everything but feeling. If his own experience did not tell him, it is nevertheless plain to our succeeding judgment, that without feeling not even a philosophical poem is possible. I would go further and say that especially in a philosophical poem is the presence of a strong emotional force essential.

In his letter to Wordsworth about the *Excursion*, from which I quoted in the last chapter, Coleridge remarks:

'Whatever in Lucretius is poetry is not philosophical, whatever is philosophical is not poetry; and in the very pride of confident hope I looked forward to *The Recluse* as the *first* and *only* true philosophical poem in existence. Of course, I expected the colours, music, imaginative life, and passion of *poetry;* but the matter and arrangement of *philosophy;* not doubting from the advantages of the subject that the totality of a system was not only capable of being harmonised with, but even calculated to aid, the unity (beginning, middle, and end), of a poem.'*

* *Letters*, II, 648.

Coleridge then proceeds to outline what he means by 'the totality of a system,' but it was very much his own system, and we cannot blame Wordsworth for not having adopted it. But I think the implication of the paragraph I have just quoted is, that the *Excursion* in Coleridge's opinion is neither philosophy nor poetry. More essentially, it is not philosophy *and* poetry, for the essence of true poetry is that there is no distinction between the content and the mode of expression. Philosophical poetry as I have already suggested, may be defined as 'felt thought' – thought emotionally intensified and made accessible to sensibility. In this process, thought suffers no abasement; it is not itself emotionalized: it merely enters into an emotional field which is that of the poet's apprehending sensibility. It preserves its integrity, just as any other object – a flower, a woman, or an action – preserves its integrity in any poem that avoids sentimentality. But what, in this connection, do we mean by 'thought?' That was really Coleridge's question. A single phrase like 'joy in widest commonalty spread' is thought and is poetry, but any number of such isolated phrases do not make a philosophical poem. I leave on one side what is conveniently called 'metaphysical poetry'; there too the essence of the poetry is a subtle fusion of thought and emotion,

but there 'thought' is more exactly a 'conceit' – which is a thought in isolation, a thought-process prompted by an immediate occasion or event. In philosophical poetry proper, the thought is systematic: it is the poet's vision of the universe. Now, it is possible to say that this vision in the poet is instinctive, or intuitive; that precisely the distinction between the poet and the philosopher is that the former seizes intuitively what the other can only arrive at by a process of discursive reasoning. But is any synthetic vision of the universe ever reached by a process of discursive reasoning? Do not even the most logical of philosophers start from an emotional reaction to experience, and then construct a rational system which in some way answers to their experience? The history of philosophy provides an answer to these rhetorical questions. The difference between the philosopher and the philosophical poet is rather this: the philosopher begins with his intuitive apprehension and *detends* it – resolves it into that lower tension of expression which is *prose;* whereas the poet strives to express his apprehension *intensively*, in that heightened or essential expression which is *poetry*.

That, at any rate, is my belief, my theory. But to talk about the poet expressing his vision of the universe intensively is, to say the least of it, not

very helpful. How shall he do it? He must have ways and means.

Actually, the ideal philosophical poem may be an impossibility. The concentration it demands is perhaps superhuman. There are four poets who might be considered as having achieved the impossible – Lucretius, Dante, Milton and Goethe Of these Lucretius may be dismissed for the reason given by Coleridge – that his poetry is not always philosophical, his philosophy not always poetical. There is no real fusion of thought and sensibility. Milton I would dismiss (but for choice not in a sentence) because I do not think that *Paradise Lost* expresses any compelling philosophy. But it would not affect my argument to admit Milton's poem. Goethe is perhaps of all poets the one with whom we might most profitably compare Wordsworth. Wordsworth himself was curiously violent in his reactions to his great contemporary. As Crabb Robinson wrote to Landor, Wordsworth always talked ignorantly and therefore absurdly about Goethe,* and he certainly did not know German well enough to be dogmatic about Goethe's poetry. But the following is a conversation of Wordsworth's repeated by his nephew the Bishop of Lincoln:

'I have tried to read Goethe. I never could succeed . . . there is a profligacy, an inhuman

* Morley, *Correspondence*, I, 331.

sensuality, in his works which is utterly revolting. I am not intimately acquainted with them generally. But I take up my ground on the first canto of *Wilhelm Meister;* and, as the attorney-general of human nature, I there indict him for wantonly outraging the sympathies of humanity. Theologians tell us of the degraded nature of man; and they tell us what is true. Yet man is essentially a moral agent, and there is that immortal and unextinguishable yearning for something pure and spiritual which will plead against these poetical sensualists as long as man remains what he is.'*

On another occasion Wordsworth declared that Goethe 'had not sufficiently clear moral perceptions to make · him anything but an artificial writer.'† These are moral objections, and were made late in life. Wordsworth was more acutely critical when he remarked that Goethe's poetry was not *inevitable* enough. But the real basis of his objection was, that in Goethe he saw a man making direct use of his sensual experiences; whilst he himself had always disguised these experiences and made instead his moral perceptions the basis of his poetry. Or so he fancied. However, in Wordsworth, and this may well be the key to his uniqueness, moral

* Grosart, III, 465.
† *Op. cit.* III, 436.

perceptions were also acts of feeling, feeling for values. All this fuss about abstractions, as we might describe it, is anything but a rational, analytical activity. The abstractions are as it were vitalised by contact with phenomena: they are no sooner thought of than they suggest an object lesson. The objects in the object lesson are so real in Wordsworth's case that they have the force of direct sensational experience. Experience and abstraction are indissolubly commingled; feeling comes in aid of feeling. And that suffices for the special quality of Wordsworth's poetry, which is not philosophical poetry. Goethe had not the same emotional coherence. Of his *Faust* we might say, that both the structure of the poem and the philosophy it expresses are vastly incoherent. In spite of this, *Faust* is more properly described as a philosophical poem than anything written by Wordsworth.

The most perfect philosophical poem that we possess is Dante's *Divine Comedy*; its philosophy is co-extensive with its poetic appeal. I do not mean to claim that every line of Dante's poem is pure poetry: it is hazardous for anyone to judge the range of the poetical appeal of a language so remote from habitual ways of thought. But what sustains the poem is the unity of its dramatic appeal. It is a 'vision.' It is not merely an intuitive vision of the meaning of the universe; it

is also that vision actualised and made real in a dramatic myth. And this is my contention: that the perfect philosophical poem is only possible when the philosophy is visualised in a sustained dramatic myth. It is only thus that the abstractions which are the essence of any philosophical attitude can be made to cohere in a structure that retains the direct intensity of poetic expression.

The *Prelude* which is not and was never claimed as a philosophical poem, has nevertheless a large measure of poetic unity because it has a single hero – the poet himself. I have on another occasion* described it as the epic of the man of feeling, and still think that phrase adequately describes the poem. The unity is epical and not philosophical. But the *Excursion*, to which we must then turn as the only claim that Wordsworth has to be considered a philosophical poet, has no unity at all. It is a collection of moral anecdotes strung together by a literary device of almost childish naïvety. What dramatic structure there is in the poem is quite unconvincing. The author is supposed to encounter on various occasions, but always in the open, an old Scotch Pedlar, and the rest of the poet's aim is embodied in a series of dialogues between the Poet and the Pedlar. But to achieve his purpose Wordsworth had to endow the Pedlar with

* *Phases of English Poetry*, p. 135.

impossible attributes. Jeffrey's ridicule of this device is really justified. He asked, in his famous review of the poem: 'Why should Mr. Wordsworth have made his hero a superannuated Pedlar? What but the most wretched affectation, or provoking perversity of taste, could induce any one to place his chosen advocate of wisdom and virtue in so absurd and fantastic a condition? Did Mr. Wordsworth really imagine, that his favourite doctrines were likely to gain any thing in point of effect or authority by being put into the mouth of a person accustomed to higgle about tape, or brass sleeve-buttons? Or is it not plain that, independent of the ridicule and disgust which such a personification must excite in many of his readers, its adoption exposes his work thoughout to the charge of revolting incongruity, and utter disregard of probability or nature?'

I have no great sympathy for Jeffrey's habitual attitude; it lacked both flexibility and insight. But he once declared to Crabb Robinson that he was an admirer of Wordsworth's poetry and certainly when he does single out passages for praise or blame, he shows a degree of sensibility. His worst fault was to judge poetry by the Aristotelian canon of heroic dignity – a canon that might still be applied to dramatic poetry, but which was never meant to apply to lyrical poetry. But

it is as a *lyrical* poet that we must finally judge Wordsworth. At least, 'lyrical' is the only descriptive epithet that comes readily to mind, but as I use it, I doubt its adequacy. It is not adequate, if by a 'lyric' we mean a poem written to be sung – something short and pretty and probably sentimental. I doubt if the attribute I mean is even what is sometimes ironically described as 'that singing quality.' It is just the poetic essence itself, and what I mean by that phrase, I must now try to explain, with special reference to Wordsworth.

In speaking of the *Excursion*, Hazlitt once remarked (in *The Spirit of the Age*) that 'Wordsworth's mind is obtuse, except as it is the organ and the receptacle of accumulated feelings: it is not analytic, but synthetic; it is reflecting, rather than theoretical.' Hazlitt gave these reasons for the failure of the *Excursion*, but he was really describing the nature of all poetic activity, and implying that in the *Excursion* Wordsworth had not used his poetic faculties. For in these three words – feeling, synthesis, reflection – I think we have the conditions of poetry. Wordsworth, in his own theory of poetry which I discussed in Chapter IV, accounted for two of these conditions – feeling and reflection, or as he called it, 'contemplation.' It will be remembered that the process as described by him was: first, emotion recollected in tranquillity; second, this emotion

contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually induced. What, then, did Hazlitt mean by a synthetic mind, which he opposes to an analytic mind, and what do I mean by bringing forward Hazlitt's statement as a key to the question we are discussing?

I referred a few pages back to the poet's intuitive vision of the universe, and to the wholeness and unity of that attitude I said that the distinguishing mark of the poet, as opposed to the philosopher, was that he strove to express this attitude immediately, intensively. When we reach the precise working out of the process so summarily described, what actually occurs? How does a poet express his vision intensively?

First of all by maintaining its integrity. He must not let the vision fade. But that much is implied in the process of contemplation. Having succeeded in maintaining the state of emotional tension, which is a more exact or psychological description of the poet's mind during the process of composition, how does he represent this state in words? Words are generally the *analysis* of a mental state. But not always, and precisely not in poetic expression. In the process of poetic composition, words spring into consciousness as isolated objective things of a definite

emotional equivalence. They are arranged or composed in a sequence or rhythm sustained until the mental state of the poet is exhausted by this objective equivalence.

This is perhaps a terribly compressed way of stating a theory of poetry, but I think there is only one amplification I wish to make now. If we take the phrase 'the emotional equivalence of words' at its bare worth' it might be held to justify those theories of 'pure poetry' which have had much vogue of recent years. These theories imply that the emotional state of the poet is expressed simply by the musical equivalence of the words. This I think may be possible in some cases – many lines in the old Ballads, or in Shakespeare's songs, prove it. Wordsworth is perhaps the best poet to disprove the generality of this theory of pure poetry. Words, their sound and even their very appearance, are, of course, everything to the poet: the sense of words is the sense of poetry. But words have associations carrying the mind beyond sound to visual image and abstract idea. And the poet, even as he becomes conscious of words in the act of composition, feels them tincturing his consciousness not only with sound, but also with colour and light and power – in short, with significance.

Consider a line like:

The still sad music of humanity.

It bears the full accent of Wordsworth's poetry. We can say of it that its music echoes in exact equivalence the emotional perception the words express. We can analyse that music: There are whispering sibilants repeated in *still*, *sad*, *-sic*: there is the carry-over with subtle variations of the 'i' sound; vowels and consonants are musically combined. But the main force of the line comes from the conjunction of a purely emotive phrase like 'still sad music' with a word of vague but immense associations like 'humanity.'

A simile like:

The holy time is quiet as a Nun
Breathless with adoration

depends again for its peculiar effect on the imagery associated with the word 'Nun.' It depends also on the tonal quality of the words and on the rhythm, and here also on the effect of breaking the rhythm at the line-end, so that the word 'breathless' receives unexpected prominence.

It wolud be possible to take many other examples to illustrate the dependence of poetry, in Wordsworth at any rate, on the mental reverberations aroused by words. In other poems, *The Green Linnet*, for instance, or *The Solitary*

Reaper, the exponent of 'pure poetry' might get his way, and these two poems are miraculous. But they just happen so. The poet, when intuitively seizing a verbal equivalence for his emotional state, does not limit his choice in any way; if need be, he must even invent words, or quote another poet's words. Expression knows no law: it succeeds or it fails.

It is difficult to bear in mind the distinction between the process of poetry and the nature of poetry. What I have been describing is the *process* of poetry, and I think this process is common to all kinds of poetry. The essence of poetry is this gift of words: this particular faculty to express an emotional state of mind in words which are the exact equivalence of this state. But obviously all emotions are not of equal value or importance: or, if that savours of unwelcome ethical considerations, let us say that they are not all of equal intensity. Nor are they all of equal expressive capacity. Remember, in the process of composition, the all-important phase of contemplation. In that phase, the conscious mind of the poet is playing the part of censor. All art implies an act of deliberation: the poet does not create in the first access of his emotional experience. The particular event must first sink back into the general consciousness and there reckon with the criticism of the general trend of

individual thought. It is in this process that art becomes differentiated into various types; above all, differentiated into the typical extremes known as classic and romantic. And those extremes are determined by whether you are going to make the expression of emotion an end in itself; or whether you are going to make that process subservient to some external code.

It follows, as a corollary, that form is not necessarily an external code. All expression has form: emotion dictates its own rhythm, and rhythm is form. Yet a *fixed* form *is* external and that is why the more formal types of poetry tend to be classical. But that is often merely a superficial distinction. The real distinction lies deeper.

To say that the classical poet subordinates his emotion to his vision of the universe (his religion or his philosophy) is not quite exact. Emotion is not so easily controlled. What really happens is that the trend of an individual's emotional life is to a great degree determined by his beliefs. That statement may seem to be in flat contradiction to a general assumption of this essay in criticism, which is, that beliefs are rationalised emotions. But remember that we are really dealing with two kinds of emotion – primary and secondary, as we might call them. Poetry is the recollection and contemplation of a primary emotion, sustained until the emotion is revived. Now these

revived or secondary emotions are very much at the mercy of our conscious beliefs: we tend only to revive those emotions which flatter our beliefs. A psycho-analyst might say that nevertheless the subconscious mind will keep breaking in. But that only introduces one more complication, and is not fundamental.

Wordsworth does not easily submit to classification in this scheme. Perhaps his most noticeable characteristic is his extreme egotism. Keats called his poetry 'the egotistical sublime' and Hazlitt was very near the mark when he observed: 'We do not think out author has any very cordial sympathy with Shakespear. How should he? Shakespear was the least of an egotist of any body in the world.' Wordsworth, by presumption, was the most of an egotist of anybody in the world. We might, indeed, pursue Hazlitt's contrast further, for Shakespeare and Wordsworth stand at the opposite poles of English poetry. I do not place the *quality* of Wordsworth's poetry much lower than Shakespeare's. That may seem a bold claim, but where, for variety and vitality of pure poetic expression can you match the wealth of Shakespeare except in Wordsworth? Their contrast lies in their universality. For Wordsworth is only universal in the subjective apprehension of the phenomena of the universe; whereas Shakespeare has an objective comprehension of human

destiny. Wordsworth has no dramatic sense because he is his own hero and his destiny is the destiny of the world he contemplates and feels at one with. But over Shakespeare's world broods that spirit of fatality, that sense of opposition between man's desires and his destiny, which is the condition of all tragedy and the force of all dramatic values.

Hazlitt once remarked, that had Wordsworth lived in any other period of the world, he would never have been heard of. He regarded Wordsworth as 'a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age.' This agrees with the general trend of my remarks: Wordsworth's spirit, his mental energy, was awakened and given its poetic cast by the great event of his youth, the French Revolution – not by direct inspiration, but through the physical and emotional reactions which it brought to him in its train. The imagination of a man *can* sleep – does sleep in most men. It is only under stress that it develops that intensity of application which is the poetic vision.

Under stress, under resistance. Wordsworth would never have developed his poetic faculties (remember they did not put in an unmistakable appearance until he was 27 years old) until all the emotional forces of his being (and they were strong) had come into conflict with his ethical or rational conscience. The direct expression of feeling is

not enough. Or rather, there are so many modes of feeling that the mind must be called in to discriminate between them. I have more than once quoted a phrase from the *Prelude* as of central significance for the understanding of Wordsworth's life and poetry: 'Feeling comes in aid of feeling.' But what precisely is the meaning of this phrase? In its context in the *Prelude* Wordsworth has been speaking of the 'renovating virtue' of the vivid memories we retain of our most moving experiences, how they link with other times and occasions and render these more real and pleasant:

> So feeling comes in aid
> Of feeling, and diversity of strength
> Attends us, if but once we have been strong.
> Oh! mystery of man, from what a depth
> Proceed thy honours. I am lost, but see
> In simple childhood something of the base
> On which thy greatness stands; but this I feel,
> That from thyself it comes, that thou must give,
> Else never canst receive. The days gone by
> Return upon me almost from the dawn
> Of life: the hiding-places of man's power
> Open; I would approach them, but they close.
> I see by glimpses now; when age comes on,
> May scarcely see at all; and I would give,
> While yet we may, as far as words can give,
> Substance and life to what I feel, enshrining,

Such is my hope, the spirit of the Past
For future restoration.'

XII, 269-286 (1850).

In these lines we have not only the poetic faith of Wordsworth, but also an exact statement of the essential doctrine of poetry. That doctrine affirms the primacy of feeling; so far Wordsworth would agree with Goethe or Byron. But Wordsworth qualifies the *kind* of feeling. Diversity of strength attends the poet *if once he has been strong*. The poet must give, or else never can receive. Power resides in a hiding-place, which we can penetrate only at rare intervals; perhaps not at all as we grow old. Armed with this power of penetration, which he has in exceptional degree, the poet opens up these reservoirs of feeling, and with this reawakened power, gives substance and life to his thought. This is the doctrine which Wordsworth inculcates, not only here, and not only in his poems generally, but explicitly in the theory of poetry which he developed in his prose essays. His own genuine poetry is the most evident sanction which his theory ever received. But I think that the main tradition of English poetry illustrates it equally well. In Chaucer and in Spenser, in Shakespeare and in Milton, wherever we are overwhelmed by the apocalyptic presence of beauty, we know that the mystery proceeds from

a depth which is the intense emotional experience of a human being, and that the beauty of word and of thought is only there in virtue of this fund of personal feeling.

LIST OF BOOKS

LIST OF BOOKS

This list comprises such books as may be considered essential to the study of Wordsworth's life and works; it also serves the purpose of giving the full titles of books referred to in the preceding pages. I would like to acknowledge my own debt to all these books, and especially to the works of Professor Beatty and Professor Harper, and to Professor de Sélincourt's indispensable edition of the *Prelude*.

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INDEX

INDEX

Alfoxden, 21, 133, 162
Alps, the, 76–9, 83, 84
Ancient Mariner, The, 143–5
Apology for the French Revolution, 114, 234, 237
Arnold, Matthew, 30, 34-6, 97, 172-3
assent and belief, 31–2
sssociation, theory of, 185
Autobiographical Memoranda, 44, 51, 75, 92

Bacon, Francis, 179
Bailey, 106
Bastille, fall of the, 74, 108
Batho, Edith C., 206*n*
Beatty, Arthur, 124, 148, 184, 186, 263
Beaudouin, Martin, 205
Beaumont, Lady, 142, 237
Beaupuis, Michel, 111–3, 119
Biographia Literaria, 139, 141, 147
Borderers, The, 118, 124, 131
Blake, William, 174-7
Brissot de Warville, Jean Pierre, 106
Bristol, 130, 131
Brougham, Henry, 237
Browning, Robert, 27
Burns, Robert, 22, 224
Byron, 258

Calvert, Raisley, 123
Calvert, William, 61, 114–5, 119, 120
Cambridge, 64–9, 85, 90
Cambridge, St. John's College, 25, 64
Carlyle, Thomas, 115–6
Clarkson, Mrs., 176, 235*n*
Coleridge, Ernest Hartley, 263
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 17, 125, 127, 130–4, 139–45, 151, 152, 153, 154, 156, 158, 162, 163, 204, 209–12, 219–23, 227, 228, 229, 241–2
Convention of Cintra, 236
Cookson, Anne (Mrs. John Wordsworth), 41, 45, 50
Cottle, Joseph, 131
Crackanthorp family, 41, 120
Craver, A. W., 116

Dante, 31, 244, 246
Darbishire, Helen, 264
Darwin, Erasmus, 86
De Carbonnières, Ramond, 79
Delille, Jacques, 81
De Quincey, Thomas, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 125, 204, 228
Descriptive Sketches, 60, 79–82, 113
De Sélincourt, Ernest, 56, 68, 82, 98, 188, 191, 263, 264
Dicey, A. V., 264
Divine Comedy, 31–2
Dryden, 74
Dupligne, 99

ELIOT, T. S., 31
empirical school, 179, 185
Evening Walk, An, 60, 74, 113
Excursion, The, 176, 226–30, 240–2, 247–50

Faust, 32, 246
feelings, culture of the, 28-9, 257–8
Female Vagrant, The, 141, 142
Fenwick, notes dictated to Miss, 98, 180, 215
French Revolution, 36, 74–7, 92–4, 168, 256

GARROD, H. W., 34, 49, 219, 263
Gautier, Theophile, 179
Girondists, the, 106, 107, 115
Godwin, William, 113, 124
Goethe, 31–2, 244–6, 258
Gorsas, Antoine Joseph, 115–6
Grasmere, 213
Green Linnet, The, 252
Grosart, Alexander B., 44, 264
Guilt and Sorrow, 118, 124, 141

HANCOCK, R., 23
Harper, George McLean, 96, 114, 116, 117, 163, 263
Hartley, David, 147, 148, 149, 152, 158, 179, 181, 184
Haydon, Benjamin Robert, 22, 24, 263
Hazlitt, William, 17, 21–2, 228, 249–50, 255, 256
Horrocks, Miss, 204
humanism, 27, 109–10, 182, 183, 195–8
Hunt, Leigh, 22, 263
Hutchinson, Mary (Mrs. Wordsworth), 128, 131, 163–7, 201, 206–7, 209, 211
Hutchinson, Thomas, 264

IMAGINATION, 151
imagination and fancy, 162
inspiration, psychology of, 159–61

JEFFREY, FRANCIS, LORD, 228–30, 248
Johnson, Joseph, 113
Johnson, Samuel, 73
Jones, Robert, 89, 115, 119
Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth, 96, 127, 201–2, 207, 208, 209–10, 213, 264

KEATS, 73, 228, 255
Knight, William, 23, 116, 131*n*, 235*n*, 237*n*, 263, 264

LAMB, CHARLES, 17, 223, 228
Laodamia, 215–9
Le Brun, Charles, 108
Legouis, Emile, 79, 80, 89, 96, 117, 203, 263
Lines on the mountain-daisy, 16
Littledale, H., 264
Locke, John, 32, 179, 181, 185
London, 87–8
Lowther, Sir James, 41
Lucretius, 241, 244
Lucy Gray, 154

Lucy poems, 167
Lyrical Ballads, 140–5

MAN AND NATURE, 182–98
Margaret, 118
Mathews, William, 86, 90, 116, 119, 120, 122, 123, 235
Memoirs of William Wordsworth, 105
metre, Wordsworth's defence of, 155–8
Michael, 154
Mill, John Stuart, 27–9
Milton, John, 24, 67, 80, 244, 258
Mind and Nature, 184–8, 193
Morley, Edith J., 176*n*, 225*n*, 244*n*, 264
Morley, F. V., 263
Montagu, Basil, 131, 220–1
Mountain, the, 106, 115
My First Acquaintance with Poets, 21–2

NATIONALISM, DOCTRINE OF, 236
Nature, 178–84

Osorio, 132

PAINE, THOMAS, 113, 124
pantheism, 27, 56–8
Pantisocratic Scheme, 130
Percy's *Reliques*, 144
Philanthropist, The, 122
philosophical poetry, 241–4
Pickersgill, H. W., 25
poetic diction, theory of, 140–53
poetry and personality, 25, 33
poetry and philosophy, 32, 241–4
Pollard, Jane, 114, 123
Poole, Thomas, 163, 211, 222
Pope, 74
Prefaces, the, 145–62, 161–2
Prelude, The, 13, 41–50, 82, 121, 177, 185, 188, 247, 257
pure poetry, 252–4

RACEDOWN, 125, 130, 131
Raleigh, Walter, 263
Recluse, The, 241
Reed, Henry, 205
Reminiscences of the Lake Poets, 18–20, 125
Reynolds, John Hamilton, 228
Richards, I. A., 26, 31
Richepin, Jean, 134
Robinson, Henry Crabb, 17, 174, 176, 198, 204, 222, 223, 225, 226, 235, 244, 248, 264
Romanticism, 73
Rosset, Pierre Fulcrand de, 81
Rousseau, 78, 86, 113, 124, 179
Ruined Cottage, The, 133, 141

SADLER, THOMAS, 264
St. Thomas Aquinas, 32
Scott, Sir Walter, 22
Shakespeare, 25, 80, 251, 255-6, 258
Shelley, 73, 237
Shuter, W., 23

Smith, Nowell C., 264
Solitary Reaper, The, 154, 252–3
solipsism, 178, 180–1
Southey, Robert, 130
Spirit of the Age, The, 249
Stephen, Sir Leslie, 30, 172
substitute religions, 27–29
Swinburne, A. C., 118, 264
Switzerland, 77

TENNYSON, 27, 36
Tintern Abbey, Lines written a few miles above, 61, 185 194, 213
Trelawny, Edward John, 17,

VALLON, ANNETTE, 36, 94–102, 105, 107, 117–9, 128, 134–5, 163, 167, 201–6, 234
Vallon, Paul, 94, 95
Vaudracour and Julia, 97–101, 166

WATSON, RICHARD, Bishop of Llandaff, 114
Watts, Alaric, 106
Wilhelm Meister, 245
Wise, T. J., 264
Wordsworth and Milton, 20
Wordsworth, Anne Caroline, 95, 163, 201, 202, 204, 205
Wordsworth, Christopher, 50, 85, 105
Wordsworth, Christopher, D.D., 92, 244, 264
Wordsworth, Dorothy, 17, 50, 75, 77, 78, 84, 85, 90, 91, 96, 113, 114, 115, 120-1, 123, 125–30, 162, 174, 201–13
  feelings for Coleridge, 209–11
Wordsworth, John, 41, 51
Wordsworth, John (junior), 50
Wordsworth, Richard, 50, 114
Wordsworth, William,
  apostasy, 233–7
  birth, 41
  at Blois, 92, 95
  at Cambridge, 64–9, 75, 85, 90
  conventionalism, 224
  decay of poetic powers, 219–20
  deism, 86, 174
  divinity abandoned, 90
  early education, 47
  early peculiarities, 44, 52
  experiences in France, 61
  first child, 211
  first poems, 73
  humanitarian sympathies 118
  influence of Coleridge, 219–20
  influence of Dorothy, 125–30, 134
  influence of environment, 52–60
  in France, 91–102
  inhibitions, 214–8
  Italian studies, 64, 85, 121
  journalism, 91, 122, 123

Wordsworth, Wm.—*cont.*
later years, 208–9
literary travail, 213
in London, 86–8, 124, 206
marriage, 201, 206–8
mystical experience, 84
nationalism, 236
Norse strain, 42–3
oriental languages, 90, 92
at Orleans, 91, 94, 95, 110
parents, 44
in Paris, 92–3, 95, 105, 204
personality, 13, 25
philosophy, 171–98
physical appearance, 17–25, 41–4
political sympathies, 121
provision for his French daughter, 205*n*
quarrel with Coleridge, 220-3, 225-6
quarrel with De Quincey, 223-4
rationalism, 62
reading, 51, 75, 85
receives a legacy, 123
remorse, 101–2, 118, 218–9
republicanism, 107, 110,
Wordsworth, Wm.—*cont.*
111, 113, 114, 122, 234–5
retirement, 212
self-aggrandisement, 49
scholdays, 51–2
toryism, 235, 236
travels:–
first visit to France, 76–9
second visit to France, 91–4
third visit to France, 115
walking tour in North Wales, 90
tour in Wales, 115, 119
stay in the Isle of Wight, 115
visit to Germany, 162
visit to Calais, 201–4
tour in Scotland(1803), 211
unsettled habits, 61, 89, 123,
vanity, 226, 240
Wrangham, Rev. Francis, 130

Yarnall, Ellis, 205
Yorkshiremen, 42–3